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A PROMISE TO LIVE

Surviving Nazi Terror

by

David M. Makow
and
Beverly J. Spencer

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PROLOGUE

Dear Szymek, October 1942.

This might be my last letter to you. I will give it to a local farmer who is leaving for Lódz this week. He said he would smuggle it to you. To pay for this service I cleaned his barn. There is no other way to reach you.

I am on the run now. This is my second week in the bush—begging for food in the villages, doing odd jobs for farmers in return for a cup of milk and a piece of bread, sleeping in haystacks, fighting the cold of the approaching winter.

More and more, I am wondering if I made the right choices. I hide, dodging death every day. I am playing a deadly game with the Nazis, and I don't know who's going to win yet. I have heard villagers call the Nazis devils, and their *Fuhrer* Hitler, Satan himself. If that is true, I am playing dice with the Devil, and who can win such a game? Do you remember the games in the park when we were children—men betting money on a roll of the dice? They tested their luck. The winners laughed, collected their coins and bought pastries for their families. But the losers went home empty-handed, probably ashamed to admit to their wives they had lost their wages in a game of chance. I am taking chances—enormous ones. And I'm betting my life. So far, the Nazis are losing.

Germans scour the countryside, capturing and transporting every Jew they find. I know, Szymek. I have seen it. Where do they take them? To what fate? I am afraid to give voice to my worst fears, even in this letter. Some of our fellow-Poles, once trusted neighbours, have turned into enemies. What is this sickness Hitler and his followers have brought to our country,

corrupting people's minds?

For the moment, I am escaping the Nazi traps. I am still alive. I have taken desperate measures, unthinkable even a month ago. But I'm not sure any more.

I would give anything to talk with you right now—to hear your reasonable voice. Perhaps if I think hard enough, you will hear an echo of this letter, and know I am here—your friend, inseparable in spite of the war, as we were through childhood.

Good-bye Szymek. When this madness is over we will be together again—I swear it!

Your best friend, always,

David.

CHAPTER 1 - The Nightmare Begins

I remember how it started. On a clear, warm day in the last week of August in 1939, I returned home by train from my summer holidays in the Carpathian Mountains, in the south of Poland. The high school vacation with my classmates was over. My head was full of tales to tell, of rabbits chased over meadows, mountain goats spotted on the rocky crags, a turtle I had adopted for a whole week, blue skies, mountains, green meadows and woods—a paradise. The school vacation had been spent in simple boarding houses—we couldn't afford extras. But the spectacular beauties of nature were free for everyone. My classmates and I couldn't stop talking about our hikes in the mountains and our campfires by the lake. At last the train arrived at the station in Lódz,Lódz, my home city.

"*Lódz Fabryczna!*" the loudspeaker boomed. "Lódz Station."

I could barely hear the announcer's voice over the excited chatter of boys in the coach and the thunder of the train pulling into the station. I was on my feet we drew slowly up to the platform. I searched for Szymek in the crowd, and my spirits lifted as our eyes met—best friends separated for a few weeks, longing to be together once more. A squeal of brakes—Szymek put his fingers in his ears and made a face, always the comic. The train lurched, throwing me into the hard seats and the other boys.

I was one of the first to grab my old suitcase and make it to the door. I descended to the platform. Szymek had run along with the train and was there to embrace me, as lost brothers would. We had been inseparable since living most of our boyhood together—our families shared a small apartment until recent years. Though he was the taller boy, we were both fifteen that

summer.

"I'm so glad you're home," Szymek told me. "It feels like you've been gone forever."

"Forever!" I agreed. He pounded my back and I grinned.

A tumult of voices: parents and children, men in military uniforms, filled the crowded station. I strained for a view of my father's bald head, and finally saw Szymek's bigger father. They would be together, of course, probably arguing philosophy, as always.

"This was the best vacation ever," I told Szymek, as we elbowed our way through the crowd. "Too bad you and your trouble-making little brother couldn't join us. There are our fathers," I cried.

Then I saw Papa's expression and my laughter died in my throat. Usually calm and thoughtful, his slim face was stained with tears. I had never seen him cry before. Szymek's father, Moses Brzezinski, held mine by the shoulder, his expression grave.

We ground to a halt before them, holiday cheer forgotten.

"What has happened, Papa?" I asked.

Usually a reserved man, he astonished me by pulling me toward him in a quick hug. "My son, we must be brave." He dashed away his tears. "Davidek, there is going to be a war. Who knows if we will survive?" he said, and my safe world was instantly and irretrievably shattered.

Szymek looked at his father in confusion. "Father, you said war wasn't certain."

Brzezinski gripped my father. "I will not believe the worst. No one can see the future clearly, Henryk. You are frightening the boys."

"And you are fooling yourself, Moses. Our army is mobilizing. Poland may be invaded at any time."

I tried to follow. "But why, Papa? Who would want to attack Poland?"

"While you were away, David, Adolf Hitler accused Poland of mistreating German-born Poles."

"This is a lie, and everyone knows it," Brzezinski growled.

"Yes," I agreed. "Poles of every ethnic origin have lived in peace for hundreds of years. We are one of the most peaceful nations in Europe."

Papa was unmoved. "That doesn't matter. Hitler demands Polish lands to create a corridor to East Prussia. He uses every excuse for seizing more land."

"But the British are pressuring him to stop military action," Brzezinski said. "They may stop Hitler before he can invade."

Papa's reply was bitter. "The way they stopped him last year?"

My mind started to race. "The mistreatment of German minorities—that was the reason Hitler gave for invading and taking over most of Czechoslovakia late last year, and the whole of Austria earlier in the year." I looked at my father with new alarm. "Are you saying Hitler will take Poland next?"

"That warmonger wants all of Europe," Brzezinski snapped. "But he won't find it so easy to take Poland. France as well as Britain have guaranteed our leaders support to resist the Germans."

"Yes," Szymek said. "Even if Germany attacks we are not alone."

"But what use is such a guarantee," Papa said sadly. "The British are desperate to keep the peace. They have let Hitler change the map of Europe while they talk, and the German army grows mighty. The last European war, almost twenty-five years ago, was so costly in lives and

economics, that the West doesn't want another. Even the Soviet Union pledged to be our ally, but now they have signed a non-aggression pact with Germany. We will get no help from any of them."

"You don't know that, Henryk!"Brzezinski insisted. "Sometimes I think you are a pessimist."

Papa shook his head. "No. A realist. The Allies humiliated Germany at the end of the World War, forcing her to pay costly reparations and withdraw troops from part of her own territories. The Germans are a proud people. Ever since Hitler became their Chancellor in 1933 he promised to restore German pride and make Germany a great world power again. Now we see that he will run roughshod over any nation to achieve his goals."

The noise of other reunions and conversations covered our own, as we stood arguing, an island in the middle of the melee of the station. I remembered all I had read about Adolf Hitler.

"But my teachers said the Germans were a learned, highly civilized people," Szymek said.

"They were," I said, my throat dry, "before Hitler did away with German democracy. He abolished other political parties and trade unions, and imprisoned or killed all the scholars who opposed him. Now he is a ruthless dictator."

My father nodded. "No one knows how many of his own countrymen he has killed to solidify his position of power. His speeches are legendary diatribes, whipping his people into a frenzy of nationalism. He has convinced them they are the master race, destined to rule the world."

Germany, on the march against the world! A sinkhole seemed to have opened at my feet, and I slid toward doom. Every word was another blow loosening my hold on solid ground.

"No one of sound mind can believe such nonsense about the 'master race,'" Brzezinski scoffed.

"You underestimate the power of nationalism, Moses. The German people are drunk on their dreams of world conquest."

"And you underestimate the strength of Poles and the honour of our allies. We love our country, and the West will not tolerate Hitler's rampant aggressions!"

"I hope you are right, my friend," Papa squared his shoulders.

Papa glanced around the station. It was emptying of students and their families now. For the first time I noticed Polish soldiers posted to guard the exits and control the crowds. They had not been there other years. Several of them eyed us suspiciously. "We should go. We cannot afford to attract attention," Papa said.

"Why not? Everyone must be talking about the same things," I asked.

We began to walk slowly toward the distant exit as we talked.

Speaking more softly Papa continued. "There is more, David. Hitler wrote a book, *Mein Kampf*—My Struggle in 1925. In it he claimed those Germans of the Aryan race—blond and blue-eyed, were superior to all other races. They must rule. Even worse, he blamed the Jews for all the problems of the world and promised their destruction. I read his rantings myself."

"What? Every country is suffering from hard economic times, but we Jews have nothing to do with it. We suffer with the rest. Our businesses have helped the economy," I cried, stung to anger.

"Keep your voice down, David! Hitler doesn't care about the truth. He preaches a campaign of hatred against us." Papa hissed. "Even in Poland Hitler's anti-Semitic propaganda is

having an effect. While you were away there were pogroms in some Polish towns."

Pogroms! Violence against the Jewish populations of towns—the senseless spilling of the blood of innocent men, women and children. The thought made me sick.

"You think Hitler caused the pogroms ?" I asked Papa. "He is a German, not a Pole."

"But his propaganda reaches far. Jewish people in every nation have become Hitler's scapegoats: anti-Semitic violence increases daily. In Germany the persecutions of Jews peaked last November, in one terrible night of violence. On *Kristalnacht*—Night of Broken Glass, synagogues and Jewish businesses were smashed and burned; Jews were hounded through the streets and beaten to death. Stories in the press justified these barbaric acts."

"And why? Because they exonerated the thieves who stole the hard-earned profits of Jewish business men, and grew rich," outrage vibrated in Brzezinski's voice.

Papa nodded. "Every nation has prejudice. Propaganda can ignite hidden racial hatred and turn normal people into murderers. Sh!"

He dropped his voice even lower. One of the soldiers who had noticed us waded through the thinning crowd to our sides. My heart thumped. We quickened our pace toward the exit, but that soldier had signalled another, and they moved to cut us off.

"I blame myself," Papa hissed. "I knew we shouldn't speak of such things in the open."

"We all needed to talk about it," Brzezinski comforted him. "We have done nothing wrong. Hold up your heads. We are free Poles!"

Near the exit the soldiers stopped us. "Is there trouble, here?" the first soldier demanded, his tone belligerent. He was a big man with the accent of a manual labourer. He brandished his rifle. "I heard you talking loudly."

"No trouble, friend," Papa said quickly. "We only speak of enrolling in the army to help our proud nation. We would like to follow your good example."

He smiled, flattered. "Hmm. All good Poles should do the same. We must pull together."

But the other soldier was thinner, with a ferret-like face. This man's eyes narrowed. "We don't need Jewish trash here." He spit at our feet. "Move along."

"The station must be cleared for the arrival of the next train."

"We did not mean any harm, officers," Papa said quickly. "Come, boys."

We left the station quickly and spoke as we hurried along the nearly deserted sidewalks.

"Do you believe me now?" Papa asked Brzezinski.

Brzezinski's face was red. "He insulted us to our faces!"

"It is not the first time. David, do you remember outbreaks of anti-Semitism here?"

I wanted to deny the shocking images Papa painted, but I could not. "Last spring, that day in the park..." I said.

Our local park had been full of Jewish people enjoying the Sabbath when panic struck. From nowhere hoodlums appeared with clubs and rifles and savagely beat everyone, including children and the elderly. They shouted, "You sons-of-bitches, you dirty Jews, you killed our God Christus!" Screaming women and children scattered toward the exits. In a nightmarishly short time, the park was empty except for the fallen. As soon as our attackers had gone, we returned to help the injured.

"Why," an old woman had whimpered, her face covered with blood. Her nose and her leg had been broken.

"The ignorant and gullible have been listening to anti-Jewish lies," Papa had told her.

"The police will catch the hooligans who did this." But they didn't. The police did nothing.

"Criminal acts like that are rare in Poland," Brzezinski said. "Poles with true hearts would never do such things. A few country peasants, probably drunk—isolated acts of ignorance, surely."

"Then why did the police do nothing to punish those hoodlums?" Papa asked. That had frightened us as much as the senseless beatings. "Now there are bigots openly insulting us in the army. The violence in the park that day seems a warning now."

After that some Jews had left for the Western democracies or Palestine. Most of us were too poor to buy tickets for so long a journey, so we had kept to our neighbourhoods and waited for better times to come. Had we fooled ourselves?

"But here in Lódz, more than two hundred thousand Jews live and work. We are a huge part of the city's life and prosperity," I said.

Papa nodded. "True. But that will not stop the Christian majority from hating us."

I looked around. Polish soldiers marched the streets with grim purpose. I had never seen so many of our country's military men. The Lódz I remembered was already gone. The buildings and streets looked the same, but the bustle of the city which had always excited me had turned to something else: fear. I could feel it in the air, see it on the faces of the few passers-by. Fear of what was to come had cast a pall over the clear day, and everything appeared pale, colourless.

It was only three hundred kilometers from the train station to the corner of Skwerowa and Cegelniana Streets, and the entrance to our apartment building.

We should have gone up together and laughed over my holiday stories, as we usually did. Instead Brzezinski drew Szymek away.

"Come, son. We cannot linger any longer. Your mother will be worried."

Their own apartment was only a few blocks away. The war had not yet come, but its shadow had already taken away our simple pleasures. Szymek promised me, "Tomorrow." His quick squeeze of my arm told me he knew my inner confusion and pain.

At home Mama hugged me fiercely. "Thank God you have returned safely. At least we can face this together. We were afraid your train would not make it through."

"Through what?"

"The general mobilization," Papa explained. "Trains are often reserved for the military now. We must prepare ourselves for the worst."

The worst. My stomach contracted painfully. Mama rung her hands. Helplessness sat next to us on the worn sofa, filling the room with gloom.

I had to break the silence. "What will war be like, Papa? You've been through one war."

"My son, war is a madness that poisons men's minds and brings death, hunger, disease. Never let the madness into you, or you will be lost."

"How can I keep it out, Papa?" What could I cling to in this horribly changing world?

As if he had read my mind, Papa pulled a book off his shelf and put it in my hands. Papa read widely. He had always treasured his small collection of books above all. "There are two great powers in the world, David—the power of knowledge and the power of guns. Long after the guns have been silenced, knowledge will still be here."

"But if the Germans come with guns, our books will not stop them," I said, looking at the fragile, well-worn book in my hands—the Dialogues of Plato. My heart pounded.

"True. We will face hard decisions, David. Only knowledge can help you choose the right

path and find a future for yourself. I have taught you as much as I could—history, philosophy, geography, drafting, drawing, even painting portraits."

I nodded, though I didn't understand.

"The World War took away my education. I was about your age, David, when it turned my life upside down. If I had been able to finish school, I might have provided better for you and your mother, even with my disability..." He held his shorter right arm in his left, partly hiding it.

"We have always had enough, Henryk," Mama said gently.

Papa summoned a weak smile. "In the things that count most, yes, my dear Sala. Yet we have so little to help us face this crisis." Papa put his good arm around Mama. He squeezed her and closed his eyes.

We looked, with mounting anxiety, at the new, bigger shape of Germany beside Poland on a map of Europe. That evening I memorized the location of many cities, towns and main roads in Poland and Germany. I already knew many of them; Geography had been my favourite subject. "The map will change again," Papa told me. "But this knowledge may help you."

"I am afraid, Papa."

"So am I." He held me close. "All honest men would admit to the same. But come. It is time for you to sleep. Let tomorrow take care of itself."

But tomorrow wouldn't take care of itself. Tomorrow was a giant cliff of dreadful imaginings, hanging above me, ready to fall. The nightmare had already begun.

CHAPTER 2 - A World Lost

Szymek and I met to talk, but we spoke of the war, not my holidays. And we did not laugh. We had always laughed together before. We debated. Who was I to believe — Papa or Szymek's father? I felt my known world slipping away, like water flowing through my fingers. If only I could close my hands and make things stay the way they were before! But giant forces were at work, and I was as helpless as any other boy to stop it. In my dreams hundreds, thousands of soldiers marched into Lódz, leveling every building. Their eyes spoke of death.

The week following my return from holidays I went to the weaving factory. Working there was part of my trade high school course. I enjoyed this part of my education. Working on a power loom fascinated me, watching the huge machines get their power from a central motor by means of belts, wheels and rotating rods. But on the third day when I went to put in my hours, I was turned away.

"All able men are working on the fortifications," the elderly watchman at the door told me. "The factory is closed today ."

"Fortifications?"

"Where have you been?" he asked, surprised I didn't know.

"In the mountains," I explained. "I just got back last week."

"Oh. Well every able-bodied man is outside the city, digging giant ditches to stop the Germans." He shook an ancient fist. "We'll not give up our city to those German bullies! If they come, they'll find a load of trouble!"

"I'll help on the ditches, then," I said.

"No, lad. Only grown men allowed. Sorry."

I went home quickly, but could not settle. I put aside books and a half-finished portrait. Was I to do nothing but wait for my nightmare to come true? At last Mama spoke up— "Stop pacing. You can't bring the future any faster. Go out and see the ditches, at least."

I changed into my beige cadet uniform. For a whole year I had been enrolled in the *Przysposobienie Wojskowe*—the Cadets. There Christian and Jewish boys alike met to do simple military exercises and sing patriotic songs once a month. I was proud of my uniform—the diamond-shaped hat with the Polish eagle emblazoned on it, the wide, strong leather belt, with my prized metal buckle. With the other boys I had sung *Polska, Polska nie zginela*—Poland, Poland, Not Yet Perished, love for my country swelling my voice. Now the time I had trained for was coming. I rushed over to Szymek's apartment.

"The textile factory is closed, Szymek," I said. "No work today."

"A lot of businesses are closed while the fortifications are being completed. My father is out at work on the ditches today, too. Boys aren't allowed there, though."

"We can dig as well as men!" I said. "I want to help. I can't bear doing nothing. Put on your uniform, Szymek, and we'll go and try."

His eyes caught fire. "All right. We can talk on the way."

"Me, too!" Salek said loudly. Your little brother tackled my legs. I obliged by falling down and begging for mercy. "I've been practicing. I'm good, aren't I?" Salek asked. "I'll make those Germans turn back!"

"Salek, no!" Mrs. Brzezinski said. "I'm so sorry, David. He's been impossible ever since the rumours of war began," she apologized.

"Don't worry," I said. "Salek, you are good!" I smiled. He usually had that effect.

"Are you well, David?" your mother asked me, ruffling my hair affectionately. "We have missed you."

"I'm fine, Mrs. Bzezinski. Just worried."

"Yes," she said. "We are all worried. Your mother asked us over tonight to talk. It will do us all good. I will bring my potato latkes."

"Your cooking is sure to cheer everyone up," I told her.

By then Szymek had reappeared, in his own uniform. He went to a different Cadet branch, with other boys in the trades. It was a struggle to get out the door without Salek, but we were sure we would be turned back at the ditches with him in tow.

"But I need you to guard me while I make latkes for David and his parents," his mother argued. Salek finally agreed.

On the way to the streetcar stop I recounted Papa's words about wars.

"My father says it's inspiring to see so many men of Lódz digging, side by side—the rich and poor, Christians and Jews together," Szymek replied. "No one will care about other differences, now that Poland is really threatened."

"In spite of what that soldier at the station said?"

"There are always a few fools, father says. He says the ditches are precautions, but when Britain comes to our aid and threatens Germany, Hitler's troops will turn back. If war does come, Father is sure the conflict will be short and not so bad. You'll see," he replied.

"I hope you're right," I said, trying to feel comforted, and failing. Anxiety dogged me.

We sat together on the next streetcar. The walk to the ditches would be shorter from the

other side of the city. Soldiers were everywhere. Many businesses were closed. Szymek's thick mop of brown hair fell across his brow as we spoke in low voices.

"It was terrible while you were away," he said. "New rumours reached us every day. Father said not to listen to them, but I couldn't help it. This is a time when friends have to stand together." I agreed. But what would we do together?

Along Kilinskiego Street, the streetcar rattled. We passed crowded tenements, black with coal smoke and in need of paint, but grand anyway in their old-fashioned elegance, their varied facades. Once we had ridden the streetcar just for the thrill of seeing the life of the city. We had discussed golden futures—me an architect ("Wouldn't it be wonderful to design something as practical and beautiful as the White Palace? It's a home and an adjoined factory all at once."), and Szymek head of his own upholstery business ("If I work hard enough I can employ other men, too, and make the best furniture!"). That streetcar journey in the last days of summer, 1939, felt eerie, unreal. We saw were more soldiers than citizens in ordinary clothes on the streets. The streetcar took the turn at Wodna Street, crossed Piotrkowska—the busy main street of Lódz, and then Park Poniatowski. We were deep in conversation when we reached *Plac Wolności*—Liberty Square, and caught sight of the statue of the great Polish hero, Tadeusz Kosciuszko.

"What do you think a hero is?" Szymek asked me.

"My father says heroism is seldom about winning battles. There are thousands of quiet heroes, living a just life, a good life, with honesty and generosity in spite of hardship." Liberty Square was left behind while we talked. "What do you think, Szymek?"

"Heroes lead the struggle for freedom, in spite of their own fears," Szymek replied. "And sometimes they die for their country. Would you do that, David? Would you die for Poland?"

"Of course," I replied at once. "If not, what kind of Pole would I be?"

"Yes. I would too," Szymek said quietly. "This is a wonderful nation, and we must help it survive. Here we can do anything, become anything."

We left the streetcar and walked through the streets to the edge of the city. In a single glance I saw hundreds of men digging a deep ditch under the direction of Polish troops—an astounding sight. On the near side of the ditch a huge heap of dirt was piled, hiding the streets from enemy attack.

"You see, David?" Szymek asked me.

"Yes. All of Lódz is working together." Perhaps things would not be as bad as my father feared. Yet why would the whole city close down to dig such an enormous ditch, if the German threat were not *very* serious? Where Szymek saw brotherhood, I saw desperation.

Soldiers turned us back from the lines. "Grow a little more before you help us dig," they told us in a friendly way. "Now stand clear."

We seethed. "It's so unfair. If we were two or even three years older, we would be allowed to dig."

Were we to do nothing at all, while our country was at risk? "One day a leader with courage and integrity will bring Hitler and his bullies down," I said. "Maybe that day will be soon. Your father thinks so."

"You know what my mother would say to you? From your lips to God's ear."

I nodded. "Or the ears of the British. You would think we were still children pitching wooden spools at Papa's hat, or building forts in front of Mama's humming sewing machine, the way the soldiers treat us! We are almost men."

"The waiting will be over soon,"Szymek assured me.

A storm was coming. I could feel its heaviness in my belly, as if I had swallowed an enormous stone. We could do nothing to stop it, not even dig in the trench.

Chapter 3 : The Storm Breaks

On a brilliant fall day—Friday, September 1, 1939—only days after my arrival home, a perfect day for work or play, we did neither. My mother's sewing machine was silent. The whole Brzezinski family came with us to knock on the apartment door of our well-to-do neighbours. We stood awkwardly in the dim hallway until Mr. Rosenzwajg answered the door.

"May we listen to your radio?" Father asked politely.

"Of course. Come in quickly. The broadcast is about to begin."

Everyone who owned a radio had suddenly become very popular. Even the reception was clear that day. Dust danced in a shaft of sunlight falling onto the worn wooden floor. We settled on sofa and chairs. Rosenzwajg's wife hurried to get us tea. Amid a jingle of teacups we heard the announcer say, "*German troops have invaded free Poland.*"

Szymek's brown eyes, usually so full of good humour, mirrored my disbelief and outrage. The sunlight seemed suddenly, shockingly wrong.

"*But Poland stands strong this day. Our cavalry has pushed back the German tanks.*" The announcer's voice was full of pride. "*Germany cannot prevail against brave Poles, marching in unity.*"

"That sounds better," your mother said, looking relieved. She could be relied on for encouragement. "We are winning. Perhaps all these terrible tales about Germany are wrong."

"If we were old enough, we would be at the front," I said, gritting my teeth. We had put on our Cadet uniforms to listen to the broadcast. How I wanted to be part of that proud victory against the German invaders!

"Poland will grind the Germans into dust!" Szymek's little brother said fiercely.

"Salek! Do not speak like this!" Mrs. Brzezinski said.

"Why not? The Germans attacked us. We are in the right," Salek insisted.

Brzezinski agreed. "We did nothing to provoke Germany. All of Europe will be outraged, as we are. Our army will drive out the invaders."

My father did not seem convinced. "There is reason to hope," he said thoughtfully. "Our army has been preparing. But cavalry against tanks—horses pushing back huge armoured machines?"

I hesitated. If my father doubted, then the future looked less certain. Father had read more books than any of my teachers.

"But the announcer should know," Szymek said. "Our army is strong!"

The ditches around Lódz had been completed only days before, forming crude barriers.

"The ditches won't be needed," Brzezinski had insisted. "We are in the centre of Poland. Hitler's army will not get so far."

"Then why dig the ditches at all?"

"It is a precaution. In a war, you must do everything possible to defend yourself." That had made sense. "I am proud," he said. "All the citizens of Lódz are as one—united against the enemy."

The radio became the centre of our lives, and the Rosenzwajgs did not seem to mind our frequent visits. The next day the announcer sounded less sure, and my father's doubts more solid. "*Our heroic soldiers have retreated from the western border, to regroup for another attack.*"

"How can they retreat?" Szymek asked me, scowling.

"It must be a tactic." I was reassuring myself as well as you.

Aircraft flew high above Lódz. We raced into the streets to watch them, Salek at our heels. "They will support our troops," Szymek said confidently.

"It will be a great victory!" Salek declared.

I chewed my lower lip. "Yes," I said, but even to my own ears, my voice did not sound convincing.

"Are you worried?" Szymek asked me.

"Think about it. How can horses make a tank turn around? They would just shoot the horses."

Neither of us had ever seen a tank. I had shown Szymek my father's drawing, though.

"Hundreds of our troops will hold back the Germans. You will see."

My heart continued to pound.

After Szymek and Salek ran home, I climbed the stairs to the apartment thinking, "Please, please let Szymek be right and my father wrong, this once!" I did not know if I prayed or spoke to my queasy stomach.

It was impossible to make sense of the radio reports. Some contradicted others. Waiting was unbearable. Szymek baited me. "I haven't seen you sit still in days. Are your feet on fire?" I could not study. I paced, picked up and then abandoned book after book. "What is the use of books when we need guns!" I said.

On September 3rd, we listened as the British Prime Minister Chamberlain declared war on Germany. The British had demanded that German troops withdraw from Poland. Hitler had not responded.

"At last!"

"Now we will see something, as the British fight beside us!"Brzezinski said.

But day after day radio reports on the British were silent. Only German soldiers advanced across our frontiers. A week went by.

""Where are the British soldiers?" Brzezinski asked, outraged.

On the sixth day of the war a horrible rumble from the street awakened us at the break of dawn. My parents and I could see nothing but shadows from our windows, so we ran down the apartment stairs. With Mama and Papa I looked into the street and could not believe my eyes. The main road to Bzeziny and Warsaw was jammed with hundreds of people heading east. The janitor in the hallway turned to us.

"Don't you know? Most people are leaving Lódz. The Germans are coming," he said.

Just like that—all our hopes of an early victory were crushed! Papa gripped my shoulder and held mother close.

"It's not over yet," he said.

I had never seen so many grim-faced people. The road was filled with them—residents of Lódz, fleeing the city. They walked, pushed hand carts, bicycled, or rode in wagons pulled by horses toward the Warsaw road. As Poland's capital and largest city, Warsaw was sure to be well-defended by the Polish army—or so the fleeing people must believe. They carried bundles of clothing on their shoulders, or roped to their over-laden carts. Beds and chairs were tied on top of the luggage heaped on wagons. People wept or swore, trying to run in spite of the mass of bodies. Some walked in bitter silence. Their fear was like a suffocating fog. Part of me wanted to

run, to flee with these people, ridden by the same demon fear, and part of me wanted to get as far away from them as I could. I desperately wanted to talk to Szymek, but traveling even the short distance to his apartment was quite impossible because of the crowds.

"Henryk, what shall we do?"Mama cried.

"You are Jews. If you want to live, you will leave too," the janitor said, in a tone so matter-of-fact that I stared at him.

Just then we heard a scream. Someone had tripped and fallen under the wheels of a wagon, I think. It was hard to tell in the pale light of the street lamps. I glimpsed a man pulling at a horse, shrieking for it to stop. No one seemed to hear or care. Mother flinched, but we didn't move. We couldn't have reached the wagon in the crush. Perhaps someone died in that moment, victim of a war which had not yet reached Lódz. And all I did was watch.

The sight shook Mama, even after we had returned to our small apartment. "Oh, Henryk! Maybe we should go. But how could we carry enough food and water? We don't even own a cart. We could carry so little. And what about clothes for the winter? At least in our home we are warm. You still have your job."

"Sala, such crowds are not safe even for the young and strong—" Papa did not speak of their poor health, but I saw exhaustion in his shrug. "Yet to stay... I do not know. Maybe we should attempt the journey..."

"We are not soldiers. We are only citizens. Some people say they will only tax us," Mama said. "Perhaps there will be a curfew."

How many people held onto the same belief? Even Szymek's parents! I wondered how much Papa had told Mama about Nazi persecutions of Jews. Was he shielding her from the

worst?

"But why should so many leave everything and begin such a hard journey? Do they know something we do not? Perhaps we should follow them. I don't know."

Should we go or stay? My parents could not decide. We had heard nothing but theories and guesses. Even the radio news seemed unreliable now. How could we base such a huge decision on so little? I learned later that only a block away, Szymek was having the same conversation with his parents.

"Davidek, what do you think?" Papa asked me. "You have a right to speak."

Adventure stories flashed through my head—Robinson Crusoe surviving on an island alone, Gulliver among the Giants—my heroes from books. Now our family would have to find the right way to survive. I knew my parents did not have the strength to walk to Warsaw. The terrifying weight of their trust descend on me.

"Perhaps we should stay for a while and see," I said slowly. Joining that throng in the street seemed too dangerous. My frail parents might fall and be trampled. I clung to that scrap of logic.

Papa gripped my hand. "I'm sure you're right, David. It is decided, then. For now we stay."

"What if I have chosen wrong?" I asked myself. I knew I could be condemning us all to death. I wanted to close my eyes, and open them to find the war was a bad dream, and my parents were young and strong.

The flood of people thinned as full daylight came, and slowed to a trickle by mid-morning. I walked far enough to see that where the road divided. Some travelers fled toward the

town of Bzeziny, where our retreating army had gone, and others had headed for Warsaw. "Now we can avoid being trampled," I thought. But there was still the walk toward either destination—far too long for my parents.

At noon Szymek came to see us. I was comforted that his family had decided to remain in Lódz too. By then a few terrified men came stumbling back from the Bzeziny road. Szymek and I went out to hear their stories. "Dead, all dead," one sobbed when we drew him aside. "German planes... machine guns. My wife, my children—gone..." We found no words to reply to such cruel loss.

Of the thousands who had fled the city with the retreating army, a handful of dazed survivors returned. German aircraft had strafed the road, firing into the dense crowd. There had been nowhere to hide—only the empty fields. The mass slaughter was beyond our imagining. No one dared go to retrieve the bodies of their loved ones. Some of the travelers had gotten through to Warsaw. How many? And what fate awaited them there?

"Our army should have stopped this," Szymek cried. "Where were *our* planes?"

"The Germans fired on unarmed civilians, Szymek." I was reeling. "Women and children. Even in a war there are supposed to be rules."

"Not for the Germans." I had never seen Szymek look so grim. "They have become butchers."

I think that day we stopped being boys. For a long time we looked down the two roads. We walked home, our faces hard.

"If we had listened to the janitor, we would be dead now. Did we survive because of luck?"

"Our parents chose well, you chose well, David. But we couldn't have guessed what the Germans would do. Maybe we have good instincts."

"I don't know. Was it bravery or cowardice that made me want to stay here?"

"You thought it through. You usually do. Doesn't your father say that's more important than being brave or not? To use your head?"

That night Papa said prayers—*Kaddish*—The Memorial Service for the Dead— for those who had perished, his voice shaking. Then he looked at us, tears in his eyes. Mama wept unashamedly.

"Death came close to us," Papa said, "but we survived." We embraced.

I remembered the story of Jonah, swallowed by the whale. "The war is the whale," I thought, "and we are Jonah." A few days later, Lódz was swallowed whole.

CHAPTER 4 - Poland: Conquered and Divided

German motorcycles roared into our streets on September 8. Columns of soldiers followed them, singing loudly, *Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles*—Germany, Germany above all. Guns, tanks, and men took our streets without a struggle, and marched toward Warsaw, division after division, awesome in their might. The ditches had barely slowed them down. The German troops just filled them in where they needed to get through on the roads.

"Look at them!" Szymek breathed. "Why do they want Poland so badly?"

"Do you still say we will defeat them?" I asked Szymek.

"It will take longer than I thought, that's all."

Lódz had been conquered. German soldiers began to patrol our streets. Nazi flags appeared on our flagpoles, replacing the Polish flag. Nightmare had become reality. The storm raged all around us. But we were still together, and that made us stronger.

And we were not alone. France also declared war against Germany. This lifted our spirits. We believed they would crush the invaders.

On Rosh Hashanah, a high holy day, September 14, the Nazis ordered businesses to stay open. Synagogues were closed. We could not gather to pray. Three days later, on September 17, the Soviets invaded Poland from the east After that Germany held the west part of Poland and the Soviets held east, up to the River Bug. Our country had been carved into pieces.

A few days later a streetcar driver shouted, *Heil Hitler*!— and raised his right hand to a passenger who boarded. Szymek and I saw it from the sidewalk.

"That was a Nazi salute," Szymek said. We had seen German soldiers do it every day.

"But that driver is a Pole! We've talked to him before. He's like us."

Szymek shook his head. "No, not like us. Is he a Pole or a German? He can't be both."

We watched the doors close. I felt sick. "Yes, he can be both. Father told me there are almost a hundred thousand Poles who came from Germany years ago living in Lódz now. Most have pledged their allegiance to Hitler."

"The traitors! How can this happen? They were part of our army last week."

"Maybe they are afraid," I said.

"And the rest of us aren't?"

"But there's nothing we can do about it."

The German Poles were called *Volksdeutch*. Our conquerors had won another army from within Lódz itself. What did it mean to love our country, when so many fellow Poles welcomed the Germans and joined them?

In the next few weeks Jewish storefront windows shattered as men hurled bricks. My parents kept me home. We watched as soldiers drove Benjamin Garfinkel out of his shoe store, and beat him senseless. Army trucks patrolled the streets. "All businesses are to be run by Germans," Papa said quietly. "There has been a decree. And Jewish bank accounts have been taken over."

"This is robbery," I said, livid.

"This is war," Papa said. "Stay indoors as much as possible—here or at school. They will shoot any Jew at random. Don't try to use the streetcars. Jews aren't allowed on them anymore. The Germans are confiscating all automobiles, too. Maybe when there is nothing left to steal

things will settle down."

We spent hours listening to the radio in secret. A law was passed making it a crime for a Jew to own a radio. Stubborn Rosenzwajg hid his radio behind a false closet back, and we went only at night. Polish news was hard to find. The main stations were filled with German voices telling us to surrender or be crushed by German might. Szymek thought that was a sign of weakness. "If they are really winning, why do they bother talking to us?" We believed in the Polish army until the night Warsaw fell, September 27.

"*The Polish divisions fought bravely before the German guns and tanks overran them. Many good men gave their lives for their homeland at Warsaw. Others have been taken prisoner. But many have fled to fight again. Poland will throw off the oppressor!*" the announcer promised. "*Our British and French allies will arrive soon to turn the tide.*"

"How can our allies do nothing while Germany and the Soviet Union carve up Poland like an animal carcass?"Brzezinski asked, furious. "Some say this is part of war strategy, that they are waiting for the right time to strike. The right time has come and gone! Why do they delay?"

The western part of Poland, including Lódz, was declared part of the German Reich in October, and Lódz was renamed Litzmannstadt, after a German general. We watched bitterly as German soldiers demolished the monument to Kosciuszko. Our main street, Piotrkowska was renamed Adolf Hitler Strasse. We raged secretly behind closed doors. Eastern Poland was officially taken by the Soviet Union. A small territory called *Governement General* remained Polish, but this was occupied by Germany and policed by their troops. The real Poland had ceased to exist. How could Britain and France do nothing?

"Are they really our allies?" Papa asked while Mama was in the kitchen. "True friends

would not stand by while the Germans did this. And now the Germans want to make Lódz *Judenrein*—clean of Jews."

We still had to work and buy food. I arrived late at school the day the soldiers forced my professor of literature, Dr. Birn, a man of quiet intellect, to clean the latrines with a toothbrush. When he was done, the soldiers beat him viciously. The other teachers risked their lives carrying him home. When I got there, the last students were leaving. A trail of blood showed where my professor had been dragged along the hall.

I could not keep my thoughts to myself. "To think Dr. Birn read us Goethe and Schiller—German books! He said the Germans had greatness, but they are savages."

"David! Lower your voice. Do you want the soldiers to come back?"

"The school is to be closed," classmates told me.

We dispersed quickly, fear and anger at war in our bellies.

Mr. Rosenzwajg came home one day with a bruised, bleeding face. His beard had been roughly cut and ripped away by a Nazi soldier.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"Nothing, nothing." He would not meet my eyes. He shut his apartment door quickly on my questions. Always before he talked freely with me. What had made this silence between us?

From the apartment window two days later I saw a German soldier shout at an elderly man, "You, there, Jew! We have a job for you. Clean up these horse droppings."

The man turned, confused. I recognized him, a respected elder in our synagogue. "But I have no shovel."

The soldiers laughed. "You don't need one. Use your hands."

One of them punched him in the stomach. He fell to the ground. As he tried to get up another kicked him. "Come, come. Why so slow?"

He tried to rise. Another kick. "Crawl, Jewish filth. And be quick about it."

I ran for the door, but Papa was there before me, blocking my way. "I have to help him!" I said.

"Think, David! You would only be beaten, too. There are five soldiers there. They have guns!"

"But we can't sit here and do nothing!"

"Those who fight back are beaten to death. I have heard the stories at work. You cannot help him."

After the soldiers had gone we ran to pick the old man up, but he motioned us away. "It is nothing. Go home. I can walk."

Mama was in tears that night. "How can this be happening? The Germans are cultured people. Everyone says so."

Papa shrugged. "We are free labour. They use Jews now to clean latrines, unload trucks, carry heavy burdens. And they pay us nothing."

"It is not right!" I said.

"No, David. It is not right. Keep off the streets as much as you can."

Our neighbourhood began to look like a ghost town.

I still had trouble controlling my tongue, until the next week. Three Jews were pulled from the street and hung in Baluty Square. What was their crime? They were Jews. That was enough. We were ordered to go and look at them. The bodies hung, horribly decomposing, for

days. Birds pecked at the decaying flesh. Standing there, forced to look at the dead, I learned to be silent. Then I went home and vomited.

New posters appeared every few days declaring *Bekanntmachung*—new laws—laws without justice, rules to be enforced with guns. Restrictions multiplied. Food was rationed for Jews, while the *Volksdeutch* – German Poles ate as much as they liked. Jews could only shop at certain stores. Line-ups began before dawn and snaked around whole blocks.

One night Mama came home sobbing. All day she had waited in line outside a bakery in the cold. There was not a scrap of food left by the time she got inside. We had only two wizened potatoes to divide among the three of us that night.

"I am so full I cannot eat any more!"Papa declared after eating two bites.

"Liar!" Mama said.

"No, truly. I am stuffed. You should have seen the lunch I had at work! Someone forced me to eat a sandwich." He embraced her and begged her to eat his share.

"Tomorrow I will line up for food," I said. "Szymek will keep me company."

"But you still have students to teach." More Jewish students had come to me after the school closed. They paid me only a few groszy but every bit of money helped the family.

"We will go early, before my students come."

At 4:00 a.m., hours before dawn, we went to stand outside another bakery. The lineup had already started. It was bitterly cold. We stamped to keep the feeling in our toes, and hoped the soldiers would not come. "Perhaps we will eat chicken and dumplings tonight," Szymek joked. Even at the worst times he learned to joke.

A man groaned. "Don't speak of food. I'm too hungry. And I can't even remember the

taste of chicken!"

We each managed to buy a small, stale loaf of coarse rye bread that day. It was a victory. Our parents applauded us as if we were heroes. But when we lined up the next day, we got nothing.

What would we do? We all gathered to talk.

Mama made tea using one spoonful of leaves for seven of us, and we ate a few small squares of bread. The mouthful of bread was soon gone, with our stomachs growling for a real meal. "What will become of us?" Mama asked.

Brzezinski smiled as he drank with exaggerated pleasure. "Together, we will find a way."

Papa patted Mama's hand. "You do miracles with our rations, dear Sala."

"With the help of friends." She smiled at the Brzezinskis, who always shared with us what they had.

"Being with friends fills my belly," Brzezinski declared.

"Do not give us your bread. You need what you have."

He shook his head. "We are strong because we join hands in hardship. It has always been this way. Hitler cannot defeat all of us. And Germany will tire of persecuting Jews. They will need their soldiers at the front soon, when our allies attack."

"Yes. When the allies attack, everything will get better," Papa agreed.

So we tried to keep our spirits up.

In November Szymek ran to me, breathless, as I returned home from tutoring a student. "Have you seen them?"

"You mean the Poles who have turned traitors, marching with the Germans?" I said, not

bothering to disguise my anger. "They wear German uniforms now! They use German guns against their own countrymen!"

"There's more. There's a new law now!" Szymek said to me, so angry he almost shouted.

People turned to stare at us. I dragged Szymek into the shelter of a wall. By then I knew it was a mistake to be noticed in the streets. "Keep your voice down and tell me. There have been new laws for weeks. What law?"

"There's a notice about it right on the corner of Kilinskiego Street. Placards saying we have to wear armbands."

"Jews must wear them?"

Szymek growled, "Yes! David, this is bad! Come. I'll show you."

Szymek started to run again, pulling me along.

"Wait. Tell me exactly what the placard said."

"Armbands, ten centimeters wide. Jews have to wear them on their right arms from now on. We could be shot if we don't."

My blood turned to ice. "Shot!"

"Germany isn't just at war with Poland. It is at war with Jews! And when we are all identified by armbands, how much easier will it be to pick us out for hard labour, or to beat us for no reason? The armbands are a law now. And there are many more new laws. Others about Jews. David, we have to do something!"

"What? What can we do?"

"I don't know. But we can't let them do this to us!"

"How can we stop them? Show me the signs."

The streets were strangely empty. We spent as little time on the corner as possible, while my disbelieving eyes scanned the placard. Then we joined Papa and Mama.

"What can we do, Mr. Makow" Szymek asked.

"We must wear the armbands." Papa looked grim. "It is a law."

"But the only reason for this law is to make life harder for us! What else can it mean?"

Papa met our eyes. "I don't know. But it cannot be for our good. Come, Sala. Your services as an expert seamstress will be needed. Do we have extra material?"

"Henryk—"

Papa patted her hand. "What we must do, we might as well do quickly. Perhaps they want to give us extra wages?"

It was a feeble joke. Already many Jews had been dismissed from their jobs. Father's job continued, but for how long?

"We must be strong, Sala. At least we are together."

My mother sewed armbands, and then put the bands onto our coat-sleeves. She pretended to be calm. Father brought her tea and spoke softly to her. She gave Szymek armbands to take home for his family. Szymek cursed them, but took them anyway.

Soon after the Star of David was added to the armband, by law. It became a badge of shame. Germans insulted, beat and even shot Jews every day. We tried to pretend it was a badge of honor—the sign of a people who would endure even Hitler's domination. The bitter Polish winter was closing in. Our rations had been reduced so often that hunger was a constant companion. And fuel to heat our apartments was in short supply. We were always cold.

In December a new placard appeared, declaring that any Jew wishing to leave Lódz would

be moved free of charge to small towns and villages in the *Governement General*. Jews could take only what they could carry and 50 zlotys per person—barely enough to buy food for a week. The next day Papa was fired. Jews were no longer permitted to work in the office. One of his friends had risked much to smuggle a loaf of bread to him on his last day. He did not dare to do more.

"We might be together, among friends," I told Szymek, "but we could die of starvation and cold soon."

"No! A black market has started up. Mother is selling some things to get food and fuel. You can do the same."

"Szymek, what do we have worth selling? Almost nothing. And once those few things are gone, what then?"

"We will get by," Szymek said stubbornly. "We will help each other."

"The hungry helping the hungry? We cannot make bread with goodwill, no matter how much we care about each other!"

"You can't give up!" Szymek said to me, angry.

"And you can't ignore what's in front of your nose. All the Jews of Lódz are slowly dying!"

"No! We are cheating the Germans by surviving."

"There are limits to what we can do here. Szymek, look around. Hitler is winning."

"Hitler will never win," Szymek said furiously. "We are stronger in our love for one another than hate can ever be. There are too many of us to defeat. We will outlast the German invaders until the allies come. We will watch Hitler's army defeated and made to pay for every

drop of Polish blood that has been spilled!"

"How long will that take? How do you know we will still be alive to see that?"

It was our first big quarrel. We parted still arguing. I went home with a bitter taste in my mouth.

Dr. Birn had encouraged us to read widely, not just classics, like the Polish greats Prus and Slowacki, but also Shakespeare and Balzac, and popular stories—books of romance, crime, war and espionage. I had read every kind of book eagerly, while Szymek had made fun of my choices. I began to ask myself how others had survived wars. I vividly remembered a story in which the hero left the city during a war. He moved to the countryside. More food was available close to farmlands. I lay awake at night, torn by my thoughts. Could I base a life-and-death decision on a novel? And I knew Szymek would not listen to me. I knew I would have to leave my best friend behind. That hurt more than anything. But what awaited us in Lódz? Every day we heard of Jews beaten in the streets or shot for hesitating to obey a degrading order. Hunger gnawed at us. My already frail parents had lost weight.

We had to get out. I became convinced of it. Many wealthy Jews had already gone, leaving their belongings behind.

"It is time for us to leave Lódz," I told my parents, and prayed that I was right. "Conditions will be better in the small towns. A big city is the worst place to be in a war."

"To leave everything," Mama hesitated, "and go to who knows what..."

"We will have a better chance in the countryside," I insisted. "Near the farmlands it will be easier to get food. I am sure of it." I crushed my inner doubts and urged them to go.

At first my parents could not bear to part with their few possessions. Long poverty had

left its mark.

"In better times we can get another sewing machine, new furniture," I argued.

Finally, they agreed. But Szymek didn't.

"I'm sorry for arguing with you," I told Szymek. "But we have to go."

"David, don't go. Don't leave your friends and home now. I cannot bear to think of what might happen to you out there alone."

"And I cannot bear to think of what will happen to us if we stay. Come with us, Szymek! Convince your parents!"

Szymek shook his head. "You are wrong, David."

Brzezinski spoke against this plan. "Together we are strong. You know the neighbourhood and the people here. Who knows what it will be like in the villages, where you have no friends? What if there is no food there either, and you have no help? You are risking too much!"

My father shrugged. "Dear friend, we are both at risk. Who knows the right action?"

Leaving my best friend and his family was the hardest thing I have ever done. "Please forgive me, Szymek," I whispered.

CHAPTER 5 - Leaving Home

In early December my parents and I packed what we could and asked the janitor to take care of what we left behind. We all embraced for one last time. Salek and our mothers cried openly.

"Write to me," Szymek said.

"Every day, if not on paper then in my head," I promised.

"Come back if the towns are worse, even if you have to admit you're wrong. Hard-headed fool!" Szymek punched my arm, trying to hide the pain in his eyes.

"We will come back if we can't find food. Take care of yourselves."

Then we couldn't look at each other. That was the last time I saw Szymek. My parents and I reported to the *Aussiedlungsbüro*—the repatriation office.

The office was chaotic, with Jews in lines and clerks shouting for order. Papa gave our names and we waited. Soon we were loaded into an open truck. The truck drove us to a very large warehouse, a *Sammlungsstelle* crammed with hundreds of bunk beds covered with straw, and countless people. Soldiers shouted orders and beat anyone within their reach.

"Get into line, you stinking Jews," a Nazi near us roared.

He lashed out, striking hard with his nightstick, at unprotected heads, faces, arms, hands. Women and children cried out.

"My God," Mama whispered. "What have we come to?"

We were shoved hard against a bunk and I held her, or she would have fallen. Both my parents were dazed by the constant shouting and screaming. I took hold of them and guided them

as quickly as I could into a quieter part of the building. There we found an empty bunk. All of us had to sleep on our sides, crowded together. The hard boards bruised our bones and we got little rest.

Long hours we spent there, in a blur of numbing noise and brutality. Mama wept silently at night when she thought I couldn't hear. I asked myself, "What have I done to us?" All Szymek's arguments came back to me, and I told myself I was a fool after all. But we could not change our minds. No one was allowed to leave the building. We had to go with a transport. After three days we were ready to leave for any destination. Then the Nazi guards crammed us onto a train, into cattle cars.

Fleeing the cruelty of the guards, men lifted their wives and children into the bare wooden cattle cars, and climbed after them. We poured into the train until we were so tightly packed we could hardly move. There was no toilet, no privacy. One corner of the car became the latrine, and soon the air in the whole car was rank. Women pathetically tried to shield each other and their children as they relieved themselves. Thirst soon became a torment. Wherever the train stopped we cried out for water. Children thrust their hands through the slats of the walls, begging. The SS guards ignored our pleas. Some hammered the sides of the car, crushing the children's fingers. "Don't cry, don't cry!" Mothers tried to soothe their children in vain. The dry whimpering of the children was terrible to hear.

The train moved on at its slowest pace. It was early December. Freezing air blew through the openings between the slats. We huddled together for warmth.

For two days this went on. I could think of nothing but water, and my mouth and tongue were swollen. My parents said nothing, but they must have known the same suffering. I could not

meet their eyes. I had persuaded them to come to this hell. What little sleep I had was filled with nightmares. Waking brought no relief. I feared my parents would not survive this journey.

At last the train stopped on a cold, starry night. The cattle car's doors were opened wide.

"*Juden 'raus*," the SS shouted. Large hounds barked and strained at their leashes.

We descended to frozen fields. Weak from hunger and thirst, we could barely move.

"Run, Jewish filth, or be food for the hounds," the soldiers roared.

Dimly we saw the lights of a distant town.

"How far?" Mama croaked, swaying.

The Germans let the dogs loose, and sprayed bullets above our heads. Terror overcame all. We ran. I lost my parents twice in the screaming, running crowd. Desperately I scanned the ashen faces around me. If they fell and the dogs got them... I found them again, and lent my arms to both. Gasping, followed by the laughter of the SS guards and the savage barking dogs, we reached the town and collapsed in the town square—a space of cobblestones between shadowy buildings. As I lay with my parents in the bitter cold, too spent to move. Mama moaned. I thought I had killed my parents, killed all of us, with this cruel 'repatriation.'

We had reached the country. Had we come to a real shelter, to life, or would death simply wear another face here?

"What are you waiting for?" a German said harshly to the throng who had gathered in the square. "Get them out of here, Jews. You have your orders. This is where the newcomers will stay—here in Zaklikov—take them *now*!

"What orders?" I wondered. We had no strength to resist any order at that moment.

But then kind voices spoke around us. "You help that family, and you, that couple.

Hurry."

Someone seized my shoulder firmly. "Come. Can you stand? Are these your parents? We must get them out of this cold."

A bearded face appeared above me. He helped me to stand, and to support Mama and Papa. "There is tea and a warm fire waiting in my home. Please come."

Papa nodded, his breathing labored. The stranger put an arm around Mama. We made our way to a small apartment not far away. There a short woman wrapped in shawls poured hot sweetened tea for us, and clucked with concern as she sat my mother near the fire.

"Such a night to be out! You are frozen to the bone. Is this how God protects our people from the Germans?"

"Hannah, please. God has brought them to our house."

"And we have so much to share!"

"Hannah! It is our duty to help our fellow Jews! God will find a way."

She bit her lip and looked away. "I am sorry. Please forgive a foolish woman. Drink, drink. Warm yourselves. Here is some bread to dip in the tea."

She handed us small squares of heavy rye bread. I hesitated.

"Eat, drink," the man urged us. "You have had a long journey. God will provide. I am sorry I cannot offer you beds, but here are blankets, and places for you near the fire. You will be safe here. I am Ira, but most people call me Goldberg the Tailor. My wife Hannah you have met. You are welcome in our home."

A sewing machine stood close by, and clothes in varying stages of repair hung from hooks on the walls. A simple kitchen took up most of the room, with a bare wooden table and chairs.

This home was poorer than our own, and I felt a sudden stab of guilt. Were we drinking the last of their sugar in our tea? Eating the last of their bread?

"What did the German guard mean about orders? Have you been forced to take us in?" I could not help asking. Szymek always said words fell out of my mouth at ridiculous times. Why should I question their kindness, when my feet and hands were still numb?

The man looked at me. "The Germans ordered us to take you in, but we would have anyway. Is it not God's wish that we help one another, until better days come?"

"We are grateful," Papa said. His hand shook as he drank his tea. He smiled at Hannah. "Thank you, and God reward you for what you have done for us."

Her face softened. She took one of the shawls from her shoulders and wrapped it around Mama. "There is no need for thanks. We are one people. How your wife trembles!"

We all helped Mama drink and eat, one morsel at a time. At last she smiled, and her head nodded with exhaustion. "Thank you," she rasped. "I am much better now."

"We will leave you to sleep, then. Sleep mends much."

The blankets were threadbare, but the room was warm, and the clean wooden floor suddenly seemed a luxury.

"We will do better here," Papa said to me, as if he could read my misgivings on my face. "Do not worry, Davidek. Sleep now."

We lay down as close to the banked fire as we could. At least we were away from the Germans. I held onto that hope as I let myself relax and sleep, feeling the unfamiliar sense of safety there.

The Goldbergs had five children. Ira worked from dawn until midnight to feed his family.

We ate small portions of country bread and potatoes. There was no sweetened tea after that first night. Hannah carried water in from the district outdoor pump, and her hands were red from washing clothes by hand. She took in laundry to add to the family income. Of course, we began to help as much as we could. I carried the water to begin with, and then went to look for paying work the first day. The following week I wrote Szymek a letter:

Dear Szymek, December 1939

We are in Zaklikow–a typical small Jewish village—a *shtetl*, arranged around a market square. We are staying with a tailor, Ira Goldberg, who has barely enough to feed his own wife and children. I have tried to earn our bread, but in so small a village, all the work is already being done by poor Jews. They chop wood, carry burdens, and make life easier for richer families and Christian farmers.

At house after house I am told they need no hired help. I see their poverty and wonder again about the wisdom of my plan.

Not only that, in every Jewish home there are many of us transportee—Jews brought here from the city by the Germans, some of us volunteers. We have overwhelmed

so small a village. Where is the plentiful food I had thought to find in the countryside? I tell you, Szymek, it is hard to live with my doubts.

Still, Germans are never seen in town, and we feel the exhilaration of freedom. We can walk in the streets without fearing a beating or worse. Jews and Christians come and go from the tailor's house, as if the war had never begun. My mother smiles as she patiently stitches garments by hand, to help the tailor.

Father looked for work as a clerk, since his disabled right arm makes manual labour impossible. But neither of us found anything. Goldberg does not seem worried by that. He follows his rabbi's advice. The rabbi is a small man with a large beard and a round black hat. As he walks about the village, he asks and answers questions, in an endless conversation with himself and his followers. "All signs point to the coming of the Messiah," he said one day, staring at some distant vision. "Just be patient and wait a little longer." His flock nodded. They divide the bread into smaller and smaller portions.

The tailor's children, like other Jewish children here, study our holy books in the religious schools, the *cheders*–the Torah, for the younger ones, while older children study the logic of the Talmud and the mystic secrets of the Kabbalah. In Lódz there were many non-religious Jewish schools, like the one I attended. I do not know the holy books very well. Here, all Jewish schools are religious. I am amazed at the debates Ira's children hold among themselves and their father. Even his seven-year-old can speak of the Torah. His home is full of more than generosity. I have never seen such faith before, Szymek. I want to call it blind faith, but what choice do they have? They really believe God will preserve them. I find their devotion admirable, but I cannot share their belief. I am looking for a way for us to survive.

If my parents didn't look to me for guidance it would be easier. Do your parents lean on you too? Are you making life-and-death decisions in Lódz, while we're in the country? But you're so strong. I know you'll find a way. If anyone can do it, you can, Szymek. Survive!

I decided I could try to smuggle this letter to you. I am sending it with a farmer

traveling to Lódz to sell his produce. For this favour I worked for him a whole week. He has promised to get this letter to you. I await your reply eagerly. It might be months before I can get another letter through. I think of you every day.

Please write. Our address is on the envelope.

Your best friend, always,

David.

As the days passed we watched Hannah water down the soup and stretch her food to fill three more mouths. We became more and more uncomfortable.

"We are taking food out of the mouths of these children," Mama said sadly.

"There is no work to be had anywhere in this village," Papa said. "And not much food to buy. What can we do?"

"I have heard there is a more prosperous village, Urzedow, not far away," I said. "There are fewer homeless Jews sheltering there. Why don't we try our luck there?"

Ira was supportive. "You are welcome to stay, but if you are determined to go, I will ask Josele to take you with his horse and carriage. You could not walk all that way."

After six weeks with the tailor, we decided to move. Mama said a tearful farewell to Hannah and the children. I think she had become quite attached to them, especially the youngest, a shy little girl named Hayale. We decided to gamble again, and we wouldn't know whether we had chosen well until it was too late to turn back.

CHAPTER 6 - Urzedow

Soon my parents and I were in a carriage, on the way to Urzedow.

"Look at that!" Papa said.

"At what? All I see is black frozen fields and farmhouses," Mama said.

"That's what I mean. I can't see a Nazi in any direction. It's beautiful!" He smiled at me.

I wondered if he were trying to comfort me, but even I felt good about this. I breathed easier, as if I had been choking on smoke for a long time. My father sat straighter. Mama looked calm and happy.

"How rich the farmhouses look!" Papa said.

It was true. I had seen rich farmlands from the train windows, going to and from holidays. Urzedow sat in the middle of such farmlands. Surely food would be easier to find there!

When we arrived we found a bustling market where stalls overflowed with food at fairly cheap prices. Immediately we dug out what was left of our small savings and bought some potatoes, cabbage and onions. We saw the Jews of Urzedow there too—shoemakers, seamstresses, tailors, barbers, glaziers who worked with glass, storekeepers and some traveling salesmen, selling out of their baskets. Mama examined the needlework and nodded to the seamstress, as if to a relative. "Nice straight seams you sew. It is not so easy."

The Jews lived around the market square while most of the Christians lived a little outside this area, as in Zaklikow. For centuries the small shtetls have been like this. Jews and Christians have lived separately, knowing little of each other. We might meet at the same market stall, but that was the end of it.

Most of the homes were very primitive—again no bathrooms, but we were able to find a room in the market square to rent, and that seemed like paradise. A few Jewish homes looked grander. I marked them in my memory, and offered to work for them the next day. I was able to find work quickly—running errands, chopping wood, carrying bricks or helping with carpentry. I remembered Szymek telling me that my strong back would be useful one day. It was. I didn't earn much, but it was enough. We settled in.

"You were right, David," Papa said after a good meal, as we relaxed in front of the fire. "This place is better than Lódz. We can eat like kings!"

Mama laughed. Papa's praise for her cooking was always lavish. It was an old joke. We never tired of it.

The Christian farmers there were doing well. The estate where the priest lived was like a palace. I missed having a friend to confide in, so I wrote to my best friend again.

Dear Szymek, February 1940

I can't tell you how excited I was to get your reply! It was forwarded to us from Zaklikow by the Goldberg family. But I was very shocked by what you told me of the ghetto. So much happened only weeks after my parents and I left. How could the Germans force all Jews move into Baluty, the poorest quarter of the city, crowding so many thousands into such a small area? How can you endure living with so many people in every room? You didn't say what you took with you in your one small bag. How could you choose in an instant like that, at gunpoint? With the ghetto surrounded by barbed wire, supplies must be very hard to get.

We can't come back now, can we? I suppose I hoped the rumours were false. Will we ever be able to come home?

At least the Germans have stopped going into the ghetto to beat and kill Jews. Perhaps the barbed wire can protect you, even though it traps you, too. The Jews who help the Nazis organize life in the ghetto sound cruel. But they must obey. Do you hate them? So you have become a factory worker, cheap labour for the Germans! One loaf of bread for five days' work isn't enough to live on, Szymek, even with a little soup added! How are you managing? Even with classes and books to keep up your spirits, you must be exhausted. You will run out of sheds to demolish and burn for warmth soon, I think. Once you have burned your chairs and beds, what then?

If the ghetto hospitals have so little medicine, what good are they? Fevers and diseases will spread. How can starving people fight them off? I am afraid for you.

Can you get any news of the war there? Would it be safe to write it down and send it to me? Don't put yourself in danger, though. A traveling salesman is taking this letter, in return for a sack of potatoes!

Please write me again as soon as you can. Things must get better soon! Surely the war will be over and we will be together again. Here people say the British are strong, and they will make Germany stop devouring Europe.

As always, your best friend,

David

After that I couldn't send any other letters for a long while. It became too dangerous.

After all our running, Hitler's soldiers came to Urzedow too. *Volksdeutch* in the German army took over the priest's estate. The Polish Nazis behaved worse than the Germans. Were they trying to outdo them in their hatred of Jews?

Endless rules for Jews were posted. I saw a man shot for buying twenty-five kilos of potatoes in the market—too much food for a Jew. I didn't blame him, though. Some days the market stalls were half empty. Another man was tortured, and his beard cut off. The Christian doctor who bound up his wounds was also shot. "Conditions here could become the same as in the Lódz ghetto!" I thought. To make a cooking fire and heat the room, Papa and I gathered dry branches in a forest miles outside of town. Hours of walking for such a little fuel.

Only a few weeks later the German Commandant introduced Jewish slave labor—heavy work without pay, food or rest. I chopped wood and cleared snow at gunpoint. We shovelled snow from the roads—back-breaking labor, our crew working in a line. We had to clear ten kilometers of road—from Urzedow to Krasnik, the next town. When one of us stopped to pant, the guards beat him.

Spring was not far off, but the snowdrifts were enormous. Progress slowed as we encountered deep drifts, and had to throw the heavy snow long distances. One day a German guard came up close behind me as I was bent over my work. I half turned, startled. I should have known better. He hit me in the face with the butt of his rifle, breaking off my two front teeth. Eating became painful. We had little food, so I was spared the trouble for the most part. I soaked my small morsels of bread in our watery soup, and gummed them down.

The rich Jews were ordered to form a *Judenrat* to advise the Germans and make sure the rest of us obeyed orders. If they had refused to cooperate they would have been shot. Ordering

punishment for other Jews became a way to survive. I remember thinking Urzedow could not change the way Lódz did. I had been wrong, and I called myself a fool. The ghetto could not be worse than this, I reasoned. What would become of us? The question haunted me. At night I lay awake, trying to think of a way out. But my mind was blank. Mama and Papa never reproached me, and that made me feel worse. I wished they would.

At last the warmth of summer arrived. I chopped wood for the Germans at the priest's estate. One day I saw a recent newspaper by the kindling pile. It was *Die Volkerisher Beobacher*, a widely read German newspaper. One of the soldiers must have left it. I managed to glance at the front page. The headlines boasted of recent German conquests in the West. I had heard rumours about them, but here the facts were printed in big black letters. I learned that between April and July 1940 the Germans had conquered a large chunk of Europe. By that summer Denmark, Norway, France and Belgium were under German rule, too. Paris had surrendered. And the British, on whom we had placed all our hopes, abandoned all of us. They withdrew their forces to Dunkirk, and then back across the channel to England. I had no time to read more. A soldier came to beat me for malingering.

When I told my parents, I saw despair in their eyes. Papa pounded the table with his fist to drive it away. "The British will be back," he insisted. "They cannot let their allies suffer forever."

Hunger and hard work ate at our courage as the months passed; fall, winter, and then a new year arrived—1941. Would things ever change? At last one change encouraged me: I found a way to write to Szymek.

Dear Szymek, July 1941

Last March I got permission to work as a farmhand! The farm is about two kilometers from the market square. I can walk to it easily. I can sleep in the barn week nights, eat every day and take extra food to my parents! And I will have part of Sundays off, so I can walk back to town and bring my parents the food. I am full of hope now. While I am in the fields no Nazis can see me, so I can write you a real letter again.

My broken teeth hurt less as time passes. Things are getting better. But I worry about you and your family, Szymek. A passing farmer said Jews were being sent out of the ghetto to work on farms, too. Is it possible that you, too, are at a farm, perhaps not far from here? If only we could see each other!

Didn't we used to make bad jokes about farmers? I take them all back. Summer is here, making the days longer and I go out with the cows to the pastures. I smell fresh air, see green grass, the blue sky. I clean manure from of the barns and look after the animals. I have learned to guide a plough behind horses in the field. Farming is hard work, but it takes skill. I know which horse to put on the outside of the turn, when ploughing, and which cows have a temper. The other workers and I give names to the cows and horses. Chickens are too vicious to deserve names. They peck at my ankles when I feed them.

The farmer, Bolek Siedlecki, lets me eat enough food. I have even tasted meat! Perhaps that is because I read to his six-year-old daughter, Zosia, in the evenings, after my other work. He cannot read himself, and Zosia loves stories. I make Siedlecki's few old books sound interesting for her. She reminds me that all children start out innocent and pure. Later they are changed by the ideas of grownups. Soon Britain's outrage will

overtake Hitler and his army, and the innocent will not be taught to hate Jews anymore. We will be together again, then, Szymek!

I am a hero every time I go home to deliver food. My parents are looking better. We have begun to believe in a future again. I only hope conditions in Lódz have improved for you and your family, too. I will smuggle this letter to you when the opportunity arises.

I hear rumours that England was bombed heavily by the Germans all last summer and fall. And everyone says the Italians have joined forces with the Germans in North Africa. Both of them are fighting the Allied Forces there. When will they get around to freeing Poland, with so many countries in turmoil?

The last Sunday in June I was out in the pastures alone with the cows—one of my favourite places. The quiet of the fields was shattered suddenly by distant explosions. That afternoon we learned that Germany had invaded Soviet-held territories. We were sure the Soviets would strike back at Hitler swiftly. We were giddy with hope.

"The Soviets are a great power," Papa assured us. "The Germans have made a mistake. This might turn the whole tide of the war against Germany!"

"And I will bring Szymek to meet my favourite cows!" I told him.

Szymek, we can't give up! Promise me. If you don't stand strong with me, how can I go on? What will happen to all of us now? Maybe with the Soviets fighting now the Germans will go away. A traveler has agreed to take this letter. Be well!

Your closest friend, though distance divides us,

David

But the Germans did not go away. Instead we heard that the German army advanced deep into the Soviet Union. Within a few weeks, the Germans carried out Operation *Barbarrossa,* taking Minsk, then crossing the Dnieper River and laying siege to Leningrad. By October they had taken Kiev, Odessa and Kharkov in the Ukraine. It looks as though the Soviet Union will soon fall to the Germans. What next?

The autumn of 1941 passed. We learned that more ghettos were formed in towns all over occupied Poland. I wondered if the war would ever end. I even prayed to whatever God ruled the world for help. Then good news came in December. Siedlecki's neighbor told us that the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbour in Hawaii. We were astonished. The war gobbled up more and more of the world. The Americans declared war with both Japan and Germany. We talked late into the night about the military strength of the Americans. Papa was sure that with the Americans on our side Hitler would be defeated soon. We pounded each other on the back, and went to our beds with more hope than any of us had felt for a long time. It didn't seem so bad to be cold and hungry. We waited for word of Germany's surrender. Still, the months passed, with no more than vague rumours to keep up our hopes.

When spring 1942 came I was hired back by Siedlecki, and our bellies suffered less.

One night that spring I was sound asleep in the barn. I had worked hard in the fields, as always. When my body was exhausted even my worries couldn't keep me awake. In the middle of the night the barn door squeaked suddenly and I awoke with a jolt. I heard footsteps, a few whispers, then shouts as piercing as bullets: "Surrender yourself now, Jew! You are under arrest!"

Three policemen advanced below me. I was trapped in the loft. There was only one possible escape. I slid down the back of the loft. Gasping, I bolted out the small door. I ran across the fields, my heart pounding painfully. If I could get a head start, surprise them... But they were at my heels. A fourth policeman had been waiting outside to cut me off and signal the others. Still dazed with sleep, I stumbled, then regained my feet. They ran me to the ground, knocked me down and kicked me. One of them tied my hands brutally tight. Bleeding from the mouth, I was loaded into the back of a truck They took me to the jail in the market square and threw me in a cell. Twenty other boys were already there.

"You will no longer work on the farms, Jewish slime! You will go to a work camp, where laziness is not tolerated!"

Crowded into the stone jail, we were too frightened to speak. Several of the boys shook. One peed in his pants, and tried to hide it, ashamed. I could see he had been beaten too. I could think of only one thing: with me gone, who would feed my parents?

"Have we come all this way only to die now?" I thought. "They trusted me, and now they will be left alone, helpless. I should have listened to you and your father, Szymek. At least in Lódz we could help one another, we had friends, we were together. Even in the ghetto, there must be hope." I felt bitterly ashamed of taking my parents away from home. And what would this work camp be like? I feared the worst.

CHAPTER 7 - Janiszow

The night passed slowly. Terror kept us awake. After the guards had left us alone for some hours a few boys whispered in the dark. I could not see their faces and did not recognize their voices. They must have been from other villages.

"Where are they taking us? Which work camp?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes! I have heard of some of them. A man can survive there if he works hard."

"And the others?"

We were crowded together for warmth. I felt a boy shudder.

"In some the work will kill a man, even a strong man."

"God help us! Are we going to our deaths?"

"You think God will help now? Where has He been while we starve and die?" This voice was harsh, old for a boy. "Where has He been while the Germans rape our country, take our homes, torture our rabbis?"

"Sh! The guards will hear you."

"Yes, the guards will hear. But God has grown deaf. Did He ever care for us? I will ask Him face to face, when I am dead—if He even exists!"

"You blaspheme!"

"I don't say anything others have not said first."

"God will stop this war soon."

"I would rather depend on the Russians to help us!"

"First someone has to help the Russians."

"Where are the Americans when we need them? And the British? Will they wait until every Jew in Europe is imprisoned or dead before they really start fighting?"

"Why are you so bitter?"

"My father tried to save the holy books when the Germans burned the synagogue in our town. For this crime they shut him in the burning building. When they marched the rest of us here my mother was too stricken with grief to keep up. I tried to carry her, but I couldn't—" the voice broke. "They shot her."

Shock silenced us.

"Always my father said God would deliver us. What good did his faith do him?"

We did not know what to say.

At first light the guards roused us with kicks.

"*Alle 'raus!* On your feet, scum!"

They spoke German, and proudly wore Nazi uniforms, but I could tell by their accents they were the *Volksdeutsch*—Poles of German origin. They herded us with blows into the square. I shielded my face as well as I could with my arms and stumbled. My feet were numb. A crowd had already gathered. Several men of the Jewish community administration, the *Judenrat*, stood watching, their lips tight. A truck awaited us.

"This is all?" a *Volksdeutsch* officer said. "This sorry lot?"

"This is all you required!" The leader of the *Judenrat*, a man called Krakowski, stepped forward. "They are young and strong. They will work well."

So, we had been betrayed by our fellow Jews. One of the boys spit on the ground in

Krakowski's direction. The man winced and scowled. He would not meet our eyes. Some said we would suffer more without the *Judenrat*.

"You swine will go to Janiszow to work," the officer said loudly. "Holidays are over."

Some Jews huddled behind the guards. They waved to us frantically, and we heard their cries. I scanned the crowd quickly as they shoved us toward the truck. My parents stood there, bowed over by despair. Tears poured down their wasted faces. When had they gotten so thin, so frail and old? They were both waving with all their might. I waved back.

"Papa!" My heart pushed into my throat. Jumbled words caught where it pounded, and could not squeeze past. Would I ever see my parents again? Or them me? I was their only hope as hunger squeezed Urzedow's Jews tighter and tighter. Who would help them now? Blows stung my back.

"Move, scum!"

I scrambled into the open-backed truck with the others. As the truck pulled out and drove away, my parents watched. Papa had his good arm around Mama, holding her up. Their figures shrank, the square diminished in the distance, and then disappeared. The boy next to me touched my arm.

"Stop waving. They cannot see you any more," he said.

I looked at him and lowered my arm. Two of the boys lay slumped on the truck floor, weeping openly. Other faces were blank with shock. Some nursed their cuts and bruises.

"I am their only child," I said. "There is no one else to help them."

The boy nodded and looked away. We headed west. Soon we were huddled low down, watching flat gray fields roll by. There was no sign of a crop yet. Some of the fields had been ploughed. Others lay barren. A gray sky glowered overhead. The truck bounced through ruts in

the road, and we clung to the sides. No one had the breath for talking.

Copses of poplars and willows came into sight. "We must be close to the Vistula River," one of the boys said. Then from a small rise I saw it over the trees: a shining expanse of wide water, great river of Poland. On one side a forest marched to meet the road. On the other, flat fields stretched away from the river. I looked to the south. The river waters had come from Kracow and flowed towards Warsaw miles away to the north. What was happening to the Jews there?

We drove past a tall barbed wire fence into a mud square. An armed German guard closed the gate behind us with a loud clang. We had arrived at Janiszow, a sign announced, a German labour camp. Brown wooden barracks surrounded the square. Tall earthworks cut off the view of the river, which seemed to lie about a thousand feet beyond the camp.

"'Raus!" Guards unslung their rifles and motioned us out of the truck. "Line up, Jew dogs!"

The driver handed papers to a short, heavyset German officer. This was the Commandant of the camp. He carried a short whip.

"Why have you not lined up?" He lashed at the nearest boys, drawing blood.

We stumbled into a line, prodded by blows.

"Roll call. You will answer when your name is called. You will obey quickly, Jewish dirt, or pay the price!"

"Berg, Dobrszycki, Mayer...

He did not say what price, but I answered as fast as I could when Makow was called.

We were assigned to a barracks, where two-layered bunk beds stood in lines. But we were not allowed to rest.

"Work time. Quick march."

We had had nothing to eat or drink since our capture. A smell of food came from one of the buildings. One of the boys asked for water. A guard struck him to the ground and kicked him in the stomach.

"You will get water when you have earned it. Up, up! March." Another kick.

Doubled up in pain, the boy lurched to his feet. We were marched past a shed where each of us was given a shovel, then to the back of the earthworks. There boys and men shovelled dirt into wheelbarrows. When each barrow was full, it was pushed along a path up to the top of the earthworks, and dumped. Men struggled to push the heavy barrows up the slope. On top other boys tamped down the earth with their shovels and feet, making a low hill in front of the trenches.

The boy who had been struck worked beside me. For an instant he leaned on the wooden handle of his shovel. He smiled through his cracked lip. "This is for defense against the Soviets," he hissed. "The Germans want to defend this side of the river against the Soviet army. Maybe the Germans are losing already."

"No talking!" Another blow. "You get no soup today, Jew brat."

"They are winning here," I whispered back, when the guards had walked further down the line.

The guards wore the black uniforms of the hated SS, whose job it was to hunt down and to guard Jews. They shouted insults and obscenities at us as we worked. Some of insults I had never heard before. Most of them were stupid and mindless.

"Jew pig. Work, you stinking pigs! Dig faster! Are you all useless?"

A sort of numbness set in after hours of verbal abuse and exhausting labour.

My hands became blistered and bleeding. My back ached from leaning over the shovel.

The earth was hardpacked. We used our feet to drive in the shovels, and every shovelful seemed to grow heavier. Perhaps two hundred Jews laboured under the sun. The clouds had cleared and the sun baked the earth hard. The day had grown hot. Insects swarmed and bit. Sweat poured down our bodies, and thirst tormented us. I was put on wheelbarrow duty later in the afternoon. It was a relief to stand up, but I soon found even my farmer's muscles trembling as we shifted load after load of dirt. Soon we were too spent to think of anything but water and the dirt in front of our faces, or the next step up the slope. One man overbalanced and lost control of his wheelbarrow. The dirt spilled onto the slope. Curses and blows drove him as he righted the barrow and began to scoop up the earth.

"You, there." I felt a nudge. "Help the dog pick it up. Can't you Jews do anything right? Animals work better than you! A pig has more brains! What do you say?"

I felt a bruising blow across my shoulder. "What?" I asked, a grunt of confusion.

"Say 'yes,'" someone whispered.

Another blow fell.

"Insolent brat!" Pain blacked out my vision as the guard knocked me to my knees. "Speak up, filth! I can't hear you."

"Yes," I gasped.

"Yes, what?" the blows continued.

"Yes, sir."

I ran with my shovel to the spilled dirt. I drew a few ragged breaths as I worked. Three of us heaped the dirt back into the barrow. "If they did not beat us we would work better," I said.

The man hushed me with a look. "Don't talk," the man told me. "Don't look up. They

beat a man unconscious yesterday for that."

It was nearing dusk when the back-breaking work stopped. We were quick-marched back to the barracks square, and herded into a stinking latrine. There we relieved ourselves into a rank pit. A basin of water sat by the exit, filthy by the time I got to it. We cleaned our hands as best we could. I followed the others to the cooking shed. Boys leaned against the walls. A long line formed for soup. There was a scramble among the prisoners, as men rushed to be first in line. One by one we seized a bowl from a rough counter, and held it out to a prisoner ladling out soup from a huge kettle. As each man got his portion he gulped it down, then ran to get back in line. Curses and jostling broke out as men forced those seeking second helpings to the back of the line-up. Hunger hit me with even more force as I smelled the soup. It was hard to wait when my belly was so empty, and my mouth so dry. Here, when we might have talked, the prisoners waited in tense silence. Around me I saw that the bones jutted from some men's faces, and many eyes were feverish with hunger. We shuffled forward to get our meal. But when I got to the kettle only a brackish, gray liquid was splashed into my bowl.

"Is there nothing else?" I blurted out the question before thinking.

"New, are you?" the soup man said. He sized me up coldly. "If you have money there might be more."

I stammered, "No money—"

"Then move or you get nothing."

I was shoved from behind, and a precious splash of soup spilled from my bowl. That got me moving. Thirst drove me to gulp it down, but there was no relief from my hunger. I saw the ladle dip lower for a man behind me, and rise to the surface with a promising slowness. Sure enough, a morsel of turnip tumbled into the bowl. The soup man winked.

"Next."

The man had already gobbled down his bit of turnip and run back to the line. I followed, daring the curses of shoving boys. We were allowed to join the back of the line again.

"I can see you are a clever man," I told the soup man as I held out my bowl a second time. I thought the exact opposite. I would have liked to throttle him, as the guards had beaten us, right then. His uniform was not drenched in sweat, and his eyes weren't haunted by hunger. How much of our food had he stuffed into his own mouth before serving us? What right did he have to taunt us and play favorites? He smiled at my false compliment.

"You learn quick," he told me. "You might even make it."

The ladle captured a sliver of turnip and tipped it into my bowl. With dismay I realized that was a reward. The soup was nearly gone. The dregs contained some turnip at the bottom of the kettle.

I tipped my head in thanks. There could be no third round. Minutes later the kettle was empty and the soup man left, swinging it easily between unbruised hands.

"You live on this?" I asked a thin man.

He regarded me soberly. "For a while."

"How long have you been here?"

"One month."

Had he been reduced to starvation in such a short time? My eyes showed my disbelief.

He patted my arm, a friendly gesture, but he was so like a skeleton that I almost recoiled from him. "Get as much rest as you can. And don't attract attention."

I nodded numbly.

Weary and still dazed with hunger, I made my way to the barracks. The square was almost empty. There was a listless shuffling of places as we new recruits were divided among the crowded quarters. Three to a bunk, on a little dirty straw, we stretched out. There was a low murmur of talk. It was not time to sleep yet, and the men seemed to need talk almost as much as

sleep.

"I am Shlomo," the young man sharing the bunk next to me introduced himself. "Who are you? Where did they capture you?"

"I'm David from Lódz, but they took me from Urzedow," I said. I told my story in a few words. "Where are you from?"

Shlomo was tall and blond. If he had had another name, he might have passed for a perfect specimen of the Aryan race.

"Opole, a small town nearby. I was married a few weeks before I came here." His voice broke. In an undertone he spoke of his wife, Ania. "I don't know if the Germans will take her away too, now that I am gone. How can she manage without me? My job was keeping us alive. And if they take her, as they have so many others, how will I ever find her?"

In a low voice he sang, "*Kto sie do mnie przytuli tak goraço jak ty?"*— Who will hug me so tenderly, and so hotly as you? Then tears ran down his cheeks. "I will escape and go to her. I must. She needs me."

"Shlomo," the next man said, "calm yourself. Every time a new worker comes it is the same. You tell your story again and you get all worked up. Stop talking of escape! If you try to escape you will only get tangled in the barbed wire. Then who knows what the Germans will do to you? How will that help Ania?"

I patted his shoulder roughly.

"We must hold on," another man said from his bunk.

"For what, Berg?" Shlomo sobbed. "If not for love, and the ones we love? My life is nothing without my beloved."

"Live to go back to her, then. You do not know they have taken her away."

"There were rumours in Opole before I left, of women and children being taken away from other towns and villages and never coming back."

I felt a chill at his words. Another man answered, "If we believed all the rumours, then we would despair, Shlomo. Even the Germans cannot be such monsters!"

A dark silence followed this remark.

"My bruises disagree with you, Wiktor," someone said sourly.

"The Germans will learn their lesson when the Soviets get here, soon," Wiktor insisted.

"Hush or the guards will hear you. They go crazy if they hear us talking about the Soviets," Berg warned.

"Surely the end of the war is close now!"

Shlomo's cries softened.

"You must rest and hope, Shlomo or you will not have the strength to work tomorrow."

"Do you think they will ever let us leave here?"

"When the fortifications are finished—"

"We will all be dead! They work us to death by feeding us nothing, or haven't you noticed?"

A rapping on our door sounded like thunder. "Quiet, Jews! Or do you want to swim?"

Shlomo froze next to me. "Swim?" I whispered, when the guard had gone.

A soft voice said in my ear, "You don't want to know. Sleep now. Shlomo, sleep and let the rest of us sleep too!"

It seemed I had hardly fallen into an exhausted sleep when a hammering on the door

awoke me.

"Roll call, Jewish slime! Out, out, don't make me wait!"

We scrambled to our feet and made our way with bleary haste to the square in the pitch dark. There the guards beat the stragglers with truncheons as shouts deafened us.

"Straight lines. Move faster, useless dogs!"

A few torches lit the square in wan light. We swayed where we stood. Our names were shouted out, each shout like a hammer blow on bare flesh. "Federbaum, Makow, Rostov."

After the roll call the officer heaped abuse on us. "At least dung is useful. It fertilizes fields. You are worse than dung. You are good for nothing lazy scum."

Blows fell at random along the lines. I flinched at every cry of pain. After what seemed like hours we were allowed to go into our barracks again and lie down to sleep. No one had the spirit to talk. Men grunted in pain as they lay down on the bare wood. We were allowed a little sleep after that. Then dawn came and we were herded out for morning roll call. Breakfast was a thin piece of rough black bread no bigger than the palm of my hand, and brown water they called coffee. Then to work. There was no noon meal, no stopping for water from dawn until the end of the day.

Four days later, after work the guards called out with glee, "Swimming for the first work crew. Recreation!"

I saw men's faces go white. We shuffled along; our legs trembled from exhaustion and hunger. But at the order the first group of prisoners broke into a run. Next to the fortifications was marshy ground by the river. As I watched, dumbfounded, the men plunged into the muddy water.

"How long can you hold your breath?" an SS guard shouted. "Target practice, men. Fall in!"

The guards turned their rifles on the prisoners as they disappeared beneath the swamp water, shooting again and again. The Germans laughed.

"It is a game," the man next to me whispered. "If a prisoner shows his head above the water, he is shot." All the rest of us hurried to get out of sight before we, too, joined the swimmers. We took the path back to the camp.

"A game?" I shivered. "How will the swimmers breathe?"

"Eventually the guards will tire of the game and let them come out. Most of them are usually left alive."

"But not all," another prisoner said. I recognized Berg's voice.

"If they shoot us all, who will work?" Wiktor asked.

At the next rise in the path I craned for a view of the hapless men in the swamp.

"Do you want to be next?" Wiktor hissed in my ear. He tugged at my sleeve.

I saw a head surface, heard a gasp, the crack of several rifles, a sickening soft thud. The top of the prisoner's head disappeared in a red mist.

I didn't stay to see more. One man died that day. I learned not to watch 'swimming exercises.' Each time we waited for the human targets to return, their sides heaving, then helped them to their bunks. Some of the boys sobbed with terror. We stripped the wet clothing from them and made them lie down. When the work detail in front of mine was forced into the swamp, I groped my way back to camp, breathing hard. What would be my chances?

"You survived," we told those who returned from the swamp. "Try to rest."

"B-but... what.... a-bout... next.... t-time?" one asked. The others called him Moniek.

Some were coughing too hard to cry or talk.

"Show no more than your nose above water. They could never hit your nose."

"W-when... I... do... that... I breathe in water. I will... drown." Moniek struggled to get each word out.

"Better to escape," Berg said bitterly.

"You see how the fence curves in at the top? How sharp the rows of barbed wire are? Do you really think you can make it over? And what about the guards who watch the fences?" Wiktor asked.

"When a man has love in his heart he can do things otherwise impossible," Shlomo said.

"Such a man should try to find brains in his head before he does something foolish!" said prisoner Koppel. Always he argued against attempting an escape.

One night Shlomo did not return to his bunk. We were filled with unbearable fear for him.

"Do you think he escaped? That he made it?" Berg whispered.

"Impossible!" Koppel said.

"Some special punishment, then?"

"Who saw him last?" Wiktor asked.

"He ate with us tonight," Moniek said. "Then he walked away, looking very calm. Surely he wouldn't..."

I waited for him in the black night, unable to sleep, while the rest of the barracks drifted off, too tired to speculate any more. At last even I fell asleep.

"Roll call! *'Rous*!" Pounding on the door awakened us at dawn.

We lined up in the square. In the centre of the square was a post. Shlomo was tied to it. His hands and face were streaked with blood. His eyes gazed at man after man without recognition. Moniek shuddered a few meters from me as Shlomo's eyes passed him.

The guards' barracks and the Commandant's office were on the west side of the square. The Commandant emerged from his office.

"Whoever tries to escape will meet the fate of the man that you are about to witness!" he said loudly.

An SS guard went up to Shlomo and hit him a savage blow on the head with a metal bar. Shlomo cried out and lost consciousness. The guard went on striking Shlomo with slow, deliberate strokes, hitting the rest of his body. This was true German *Grundlichkeit*, I thought, real thoroughness. We prisoners watched, frozen in horror. Moniek swayed and moaned softly. He looked as though he might faint. The man next to him gripped his arm as he shook and wept with fear. Most of the rest of us managed to hide our reactions. Shlomo's body jerked under the guard's methodical blows, and then sank, lifeless. The guard struck more quickly then, as if egged on by passion and pleasure. Blood spattered with each blow. All of the guard's patriotism for his fatherland, the *Vaterland*, seemed to flood into his movements. No one could give a better beating. At last he stopped, cut down the body and dragged it into a wheelbarrow. He paraded it in front of us, so we could clearly see the ruined face, soaked in blood, the smashed limbs.

In this way the Germans discouraged escape and taught us obedience. We were sent to work without breakfast that day as punishment. A few prisoners were so hungry that they cursed Shlomo. I remembered what my father had said, that war kills the spirits of men as well as their

bodies.

That night silent tears ran down my face and I did not know whether they were for Shlomo or for myself.

There was no swimming that day or the next. Instead we were set to cleaning up the mud on the square. Prisoners crawled over it, inch by inch, picking up tiny pieces of straw and little stones. Each of us rushed to find something to show the guards. Two boys could find nothing, and were beaten. Their bunk mates were afraid to help them to crawl back to their barracks, lest they suffer the same fate. Each of the beaten boys had to work the next day just the same.

"How long will I last here?" I asked myself. Day by day I felt my strength leave me as hunger gnawed my belly.

CHAPTER 8 - Freedom?

More prisoners kept arriving—first in trickles and then in large groups. Many were from Austria. They spoke flawless German, and were dressed in fashionable clothes. Some of us disliked the well-dressed on principle. They were too fancy. They glowed with good health and cleanliness while we had all grown thin and filthy. But good manners and education did the Austrian prisoners no good. They were given shovels and set to digging with the rest of us. Words of protest were beaten out of a few. The rest went to work with a will, trudging through

the mud in their shiny shoes.

Only one man among them escaped the work detail. He was a medical doctor. The Commandant told him to set up a clinic. A few sick boys with suspicious ailments had been sent back to their home villages. I could see the Germans feared an epidemic. Starvation made us easy prey for diseases. All kinds of sores festered in the unsanitary conditions. I talked to the doctor at mealtimes. His name was Franz. I was glad to find an educated man with whom to talk. I practiced the German I had learned in high school. Franz told me the Commandant had given him no medicines. How was he to run a clinic? He reported on the annexation of Austria, the war in general, and how the Germans were rounding up Austrian Jews for transport. "Some thought their wealth or education would protect them. It didn't, of course."

I told him about Lódz. "My parents and I decided to try our luck outside the city."

"That was wise, I think. In the cities the Jews are easily controlled. Was it better?"

"When I worked on a farm I could get food for my parents."

Franz nodded.

"But now I am here, and my parents are alone in a small village, without friends."

"There is no one to help them?"

"No one."

His look was sympathetic. "Perhaps the Jews of the village will have pity on them now that they are alone... I wish I could help." He shrugged.

The prisoners shunned the doctor because he was given better treatment than the rest of us. But I saw how their suffering haunted him. "I cannot help you prisoners," Franz told me, "in spite of having a clinic. What can I do without medical supplies, or medicines?"

I had been in the camp for five weeks when I noticed a boil on my forehead. I squeezed it and found blood on my fingers. I stained a rag with it and went to the clinic.

"I coughed up this blood," I lied to a guard, who let me in.

The doctor made a good show of examining me and listening to my lungs and then nodded his head gravely. "Tuberculosis," he told the Commandant, and recommended I be discharged.

He kept me isolated in the clinic for a few days. The guards did not approach me.

A horse-drawn cart arrived finally and Franz helped me into it. I held the bloody rag to my mouth, coughing into it. I collapsed into the straw on the cart and the ghost of a smile lit the doctor's eyes.

"Thank you," I whispered into my rag.

"Perhaps I can save a few," he muttered into my ear.

But not himself, I thought as the cart lurched into motion.

It was a beautiful spring morning. The gate opened and clanged shut behind me. A few of my barracks mates waved from a distance. I kept up the pretense of grave illness until the camp was far behind.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked the driver.

"Urzedow." He didn't want to look at me. "Those are my orders. You can go somewhere else after that if you want."

"No! No, Urzedow is the place for me."

The driver grunted, turned his back on me and shouted to the horse, "*Holla.*"—"Pull!"

Trees and flowers grew at the roadside. Outside the barbed wire nature still unrolled her

carpet of spring beauty. The straw was soft beneath me. The scents of new grass and blossoms filled me like wine. I was drunk on the joy of freedom. I had escaped! And I was heading back toward my parents. Crops seemed to glow with the light green of spring as they sprang up in the fields. Birds sang from the hedgerows. The sky shone blue as never before. A few clouds looked like cotton batting adrift in the pristine sky. Never in my life had I cherished freedom more than on that day! For a few hours I had no guns pointed at my head, I did not have to fear a beating. I was not a marked man; I was just another human being, alive to spring. The days of my boyhood, walking freely in Lódz, unnoticed and untrammeled by stifling regulations had been filled with such freedom. The right to move about and travel, unhampered, to find work or study, to choose my own destiny, to walk in the green parks, and picnic in fields—these rights I took for granted then. And I had not appreciated them. I had not even thought about freedom.

The horse pulled the cart patiently. With every hoofbeat I was coming closer to my new home and my parents! The journey lasted about three hours. By the afternoon I stood at my parents' room in Urzedow and they wept for joy on my shoulder. They looked so frail that I was afraid to hug them—their thin bodies might break. But they were alive! We were together again. My mother was too emotional to say a word. Father kept patting my shoulder in disbelief.

"Well, David. Well. You must tell us everything."

"And you, how have you lived?"

"Your mother has taken in sewing, I have done laundry. It is enough."

Barely enough. They seemed to have lost more weight than I had.

We talked long into the night. My mother washed my clothes and the filth of the camp from me. After a few days' rest I went back to the farmer where I had worked before; he was

glad to have me back. "You can work?"

"I can work hard," I assured him. He looked at my thin body without comment, but heaped food onto my plate.

So life returned to "normal." A woman approached me one day as I walked home through the marketplace at Urzedow. "My boy Moniek was with you, when they took you away. Is he well?"

The sensitive boy at Shlomo's execution: "He is alive," I told her. "He is with friends in a work detail on the Vistula." I comforted her as well as I could. How could I tell her about the real conditions in Janiszow, or Moniek's terror?

I was free, but her son still faced slave labour, random shootings and beatings. Would Moniek survive? My release seemed like a miracle. The doctor's sympathy and my boil had been good luck. I had forged a friendship with Franz, then taken a chance with my fake symptoms. I began to wonder how much of our luck we make for ourselves, and how much is given by fate. The choices I had made delivered me to healthy work and food. Shlomo's choice had brought him death. Would the kindly doctor find a way to save others like Moniek from the cruelty of Janiszow?

These were my thoughts as I took the cows out to pasture and shovelled manure. Again I read to the farmer's daughter, Zosia, and carried food back to my parents. We all grew stronger that summer. The farmer paid me a few small coins as well as food. My boots had started to pinch my toes. I bartered with the farmer for one of his old pairs. My coins paid for the shoemaker to repair them, and I had good boots. Within a few weeks I grew strong enough to work as well as any of the other men.

The *Judenrat* and the Germans left us alone that summer. In spite of the war, life seemed tolerable again. In mid August I heard that the Janiszow camp had been disbanded. The prisoners rose up one night, killing the Commandant and the SS guards and fleeing into the woods. But the boys never returned to their families in Urzedow. What had happened to them? No one knew. Their mothers begged me for news I did not have, and wept. I thought of the doctor, the soup king, and the rest. How could so many men find refuge? There was no food in the forest. Who would dare take them in after what they had done? Again I had escaped an uncertain fate by leaving the camp early.

As summer passed disturbing rumours made us all fearful. Our brief sense of safety soon disappeared. There was talk at harvest time of Jews being rounded up from all over Poland, and taken away from their villages. They were never heard from again. There were even tales of the old, the sick and children being shot in village squares. Only the able-bodied men and women were taken, we supposed, for slave labour. My parents put on as brave a face as they could every Sunday when I visited them. But I saw fear rise in their hollow eyes and pinch their faces. I knew they barely slept anymore.

"What can we do? Here we at least have food. Every village is the same," Papa said.

In late summer travelers came to Urzedow. Reliable news from outside had become rare. My parents and I hurried to the market square to see what we could learn. Perhaps the rumours were terribly wrong.

A small family—a man, a woman and two children—sat on a horse-drawn cart, surrounded by a group of our neighbours. We saw the agitation of the crowd as we approached.

We heard gasps, "No, no. God forbid!" We clustered with others around the cart, eager to hear what the strangers had to say. Perhaps they would know what was going on in Lódz.

They were Christian Poles. They had left their home near Piotrkow, south of Lódz. They were passing through Urzedow on their way to their birthplace, Lwow. For these times, this was a long journey. They had met and spoken to many people. They told us chilling stories. The man was astonished at our ignorance.

"You are living here like *u Boga za piecem*—at God's place behind an oven. Wake up, Jews! Run and escape. The Germans are finishing you off !" he warned us.

We quaked. "Do you have any news of the Lódz ghetto?" I asked.

"There the Germans load Jews into vans where they choke to death on exhaust fumes. They take the bodies to Chelmno, where they are buried."

My mother cried out and hid her face in Papa's shoulder. "Who do they take?" I could hardly speak the question.

"Old, sick people first, and then children. After that I don't know. Thousands."

"My son is in Warsaw," a man said.

"Jews from Warsaw are taken to somewhere east. No one ever returns from there."

Some of the women in the crowd wept openly.

"But that is not the worst place. People speak of Auschwitz, west of Kracow. Thousands of Jews disappear into Auschwitz. Some say the black smoke that rises every day from the chimneys is from the Jews burned to ashes."

"Why do you say these terrible things?" a man cried angrily. "Do you expect us to believe your foul stories?"

"I tell you because they are true!"

"But you are talking about mass murder! Planned coldly. People executed like diseased animals!"

The man looked at us with scorn. "It is as I said. Believe me or not."

"How do you know, if no one comes back from these places?"

"People talk. I am wise enough to listen. They see cattle cars in trains jammed with Jews traveling toward the camps, for one thing. Always toward. The cars are empty when they return."

"But have *you* seen, for yourself?"

"No," he admitted. "I stay away from train tracks. I hide my cart in the woods when Germans pass by."

I looked at the woman beside him. Her face was completely blank—no sorrow, no joy, no emotion of any kind. Her wooden expression could have been insanity. It chilled me as much as the man's shocking words.

As soon as he had bought provisions they went on their way.

"The war is full of troublemakers like that!" one of our neighbours said. "Fear-mongers who spread despair. Why should we listen to him? He is just one man, and not even a Jew."

"His tales are too wild to be true. Ordinary Poles would never stand by while such atrocities were committed. It is unthinkable!"

His stories were even worse than the rumours we had heard. We could not believe him.

"Why would he say such things, then? What did he have to gain?"

"Some men like to see Jews squirm, to see us quake in terror. That is enough reward for them."

"What do you think?" I asked my father.

He shook his head sadly. "Many terrible things happened in the past. But the organized killing and burning of thousands of Jews? No. Nothing like that. Isolated pogroms, massacres, yes. Christians robbed us, took our stores and possessions. They hated us, but everything was done for gain. What profit is there in ashes?"

It was hard to leave my parents in the village that night and return to the farm. I could not believe the terrible stories either. Many guards would be needed to kill thousands of Jews. Those soldiers could not fight at the front. This was not the way to win a war. It did not make sense.

The next Sunday I visited my parents as usual. They were haggard and wan. They had food left over from the last week. This had never happened before. Mama lay on the couch and fell asleep while we talked. I spoke softly to Papa.

"What is wrong? Is Mama ill?"

He shook his head. "We are having trouble sleeping, Davidek. It is nothing. It will pass."

"What the traveler said in the marketplace—"

Papa nodded. "You see the power of words, of rumours! We think terrible things. We do not know what to think. We do not believe the worst, but we wonder...." He sighed.

Mama muttered in her sleep, stirred, and then fell back into a restless slumber.

I was alarmed, and suggested I go for a doctor.

Papa stopped me with a gesture. "There is no cure for worry and old age." He shifted until he sat very close to me, and he looked into my eyes. "Davidek, if something should happen—you must take care of yourself first. Don't worry about us—we love you."

"Don't talk that way. We will get by *together*. We got this far."

"Yes, my son. But listen to me now, and don't interrupt." A smile ghosted across his face and was gone. He chided me as if I were a small boy again, and the smile was an apology. "I only say if—Davidek, I want you to live."

"We will all live," I interrupted. "You will talk philosophy in the park again. Don't speak like this!" I felt tears behind my nose.

Papa put his good hand on my arm. And then he mussed my hair, something he had not done since I was half my present age. "David, you are a good son. No one could ask for better. You have been our salvation in this madness. But Davidek, we are old. We are the past. You are the future. If we become separated, choose your way wisely. Choose to live. Remember what I say. Sometimes the best revenge is surviving."

His blunt words had stolen my tongue. I squeezed his hand. Finally I summoned the words, "It will not come to that. But I promise I will remember what you said."

Papa just nodded. I helped him prepare the meal, and Mama made a great show of enjoying our cooking, which was crude at best. By the next Sunday she was up, fussing over me as usual, talking of inconsequential things. Nothing more was said about being separated. We spoke no more about our chances of survival.

Then in late September about fifteen of us harvested potatoes in a row. We opened the ground with hoes to expose the potatoes. The crop was good: the potatoes of a good size and unblemished. Their shiny white-yellow skins sparkled through the brown earth clinging to them: marvels of nature. It felt good picking them up, feeling their shape with my bare hands and tossing them carefully into a basket.

The farmer was working near me. Suddenly he stood up and said: "Too bad that David

has to die. He digs potatoes so well!"

CHAPTER 9 - On the Run

Two weeks had passed since the farmer's comment shattered my peace of mind. If he thought I would have to die, then I reasoned that at least some of the traveler's horrific stories must be true.

I slept fitfully, straining my ears for the barking of dogs, or the creak of a footstep on the barn floor—some warning so that I could flee. At first I did not even loosen the laces in my boots

before going to bed, and my feet swelled painfully. But if I had to run into the night again, I could not risk losing my boots. I learned to loosen the laces a bit, but keep them tied securely enough to run in them.

As I lay awake in the night, listening with fear to the small noises every barn makes—the rustling of mice burrowing in the straw, the creak of old boards telling of changes in the weather—I thought of Szymek and his strong, confident father, his mother's warmth and generosity, his brother's innocence. How we loved our country and our fellow-Poles! Now all Christian Lódz let the Nazis shut them into the ghetto or herd them into the gas vans. I groaned aloud as I thought of my dearest friends choking to death, shut up in a truck of death. No! Surely Szymek was too strong for that. Surely the Germans had put him to work as a slave in a factory! Surely he was still alive, squeaking through the cracks like I was, using his courage and wits to outlive his jailors! I had to believe in Szymek's safety, or I could not have lain still in the straw.

I do not know what emotions raged through me as I tossed on my bed of straw, my nostrils filled with dust and the scent of manure. Rage at our countrymen, who gave up our city and our lives so easily, who could look at their neighbours dying and say nothing, do nothing! Once I would have died for them, gladly defending our motherland. I had been a fool! I felt myself cut loose from ties of country and birthplace and set adrift in a world gone mad. I had no home waiting for me to return. Like all Jews, I had become a man without a country. Because an accident of birth gave us Jewish parents, and a religion that preached justice, truth, and honesty. Father had taught me that real justice is in a man's deeds and mind. I was newly born when the rabbi marked me for my race, with a single cut. Did circumcision mean so much?

The Christians must have hated us all along, then. Why? Didn't their God teach love?

What made this old enmity so strong, so blinding? Our ancestors had been invited into Poland. For centuries Jews had been the backbone of trade and commerce. No more. Now... My imaginings made me sick. The smell of burning flesh seemed to permeate the air. Every time I smelled smoke I thought of limp bodies, heaped in a furnace. Despair flooded over me. What could a single man do to halt the giant German machine of destruction? What could I do? Nothing. If I stood in its way I would be ground into the dust, blown into the air as ashes. Who could I save? No one. Did I even want to live in a world where obscene cruelties were accepted by 'good' men, like Siedlecki sleeping in his house? I did not know. All of this was so unthinkable, so monstrous!

Meanwhile each day Siedlecki's wife, Sofia, would greet me, smiling, and seat me at her table. Little Zosia would blow kisses at me across the table. Bolek would nod to me and tell jokes—this man who accepted my coming death so complacently. The days were unreal, like waking dreams. How could Siedlecki accept my death sentence, and yet seat me at his table? I knew I was cheap labour, costing little in the way of wages and food. Siedlecki's two faces clashed like discordant music. I said and did nothing. I needed the job.

Word of the end of our safety in Urzedow came as I sat at the same table, spent with the day's labour, eating supper. A neighbor farmer rushed in.

"SS soldiers have surrounded Urzedow," he panted. "The Jews will be transported from here tomorrow morning."

His eyes searched me out. Siedlecki did the same. I put down my fork beside my half-finished potatoes. Sofia stared at her food.

"Where will they be taken?" Siedlecki asked.

"No one knows. Each Jew can take only what he or she can carry. They must leave everything else behind. Even the *Judenrat* will be taken away. Their homes will be left empty."

"So. It has come."

I froze for a moment, unable to think or move. A few words, and all was lost. The insignificant Jews of Urzedow, a rural village of no consequence, were to be eliminated. Mama! Papa!

"We are threatened, too, Bolek" the neighbour went on. "Any Christian who helps or hides a Jew will be shot. There was a declaration in the square. Can they mean it?"

Siedlecki turned away from me, then. "They mean it, Daniel," he said. He looked at his supper plate.

"Papa," little Zosia said into the sudden silence. "What is wrong?"

"David has to leave."

"Why? Why does David have to leave?"

"It is hard to explain. He's a Jew. Remember I told you Jews are different from us?"

The child looked at me and frowned, puzzled.

"David's not different. He reads to me. He's nice."

"It's more complicated than that."

"What is tranported?" Zosia's curiosity was undeterred.

"Transported. It means taken away."

I was on my feet, heading for the door.

"Why would they take David away? David, where are you going? You haven't finished your supper. I'm never allowed to leave the table until I clean my plate. Papa, stop David."

"I can't—"

"Good-bye," I said. "Thank you for the work and the food." I tried to say more, but words would not come.

I was through the door. I could not stay a moment longer. I knew that the townsfolk would tell the SS where I was, that the Nazis would come soon. Everyone knew about David who walked into town every Sunday from the farm. Siedlecki could not hide me. He feared for his life and the lives of his wife and child. No one would hide me, now. I was a walking death sentence.

I ran to the barn and threw my belongings in a rough feed sack—a spare shirt, underwear, my wallet, some money, papers and photos. Papa! Mama! Something seemed to pierce my chest. My parents were a half-hour's walk down the road. I would run to them. We would talk, we would hold each other. We would think of something.

Then I knew there was no remedy. With sudden clarity I knew the SS had closed off the Jewish quarter around the town square. If I entered Urzedow now I would be as trapped as my parents, as helpless. I would never leave the town again, except in a Nazi truck.

Where would they take the Jews of Urzedow? My mind shied away from the names of Chelmno and Auschwitz. To slave labour camps like Janiszow? Yes. But how could my parents work? They were too old, too frail. Hunger and suffering had already aged them past their years. Jewish women, children and infants lived in Urzedow. A Jew who couldn't work was not worth a bowl of soup.

As clearly as if I could see my parents in front of me I knew their will. "You are the future. If we become separated, choose your way wisely. Choose to live," Papa had said. So strong was my inner conflict that I seemed to hear his voice anew, "Sometimes the best revenge

is surviving," and my own voice, promising to obey him, to live, if we were separated.

I knew they wanted me to escape. I could not see them to say good-bye. It was too dangerous. I had to run now.

As these thoughts poured through my mind, strength surged into my tired body. No matter what the world was like, some part of me wanted life. Like a cornered creature of the woods, I had new strength for running. My heart raced. In seconds I chose to live, in obedience to my father's wishes. I turned my back on Urzedow. Survival was all that mattered. Another day's breath, another night of freedom. I think the terrified animal inside me had made my decision before I thought anything. Then I found my mind empty of everything except possible destinations. I had to hide now, hide quickly. Who knew when the SS would arrive? I hurried away from the town, away from the farm, toward the distant woods.

Across the fields, I scrambled between the heaped dirt where potatoes had been dug out in straight rows. I hurried over the stubble of harvested wheat. After some time the open fields gave way to bushes and later to a dense growth of trees and briars. I welcomed the dusk, though unseen thorns tore my hands. In the darkness of night I would be safe for a few hours. I stumbled over tree roots. It was dark under the trees. I could barely see a bush before I was thrashing in its branches. I came to a clearing. Moonlight lit the flat hay fields, and haystacks standing like giants in the night. I bored my way into the middle stack, twisting around and around, until I reached its centre, a few feet from the ground. The hay was freshly cut and stacked. Its sweet smell comforted me. I piled hay behind me, to hide the entrance, and felt relief for the first time since I left the farm. Hidden here, I could live through the night. Sleep took me.

At dawn I awoke, chilled. My belly felt hollow, hungry for food. Worse was the deeper

sense of emptiness. What were my parents doing now? What were they feeling? I yearned for the sound of their voices, the sight of their faces. Probably I would never see them again. They would disappear into the Nazi war machine. Our love for one another made no difference. I wanted to cry, to let out the pain inside. But tears would not come. There was no time to mourn. Instead the urgent need to move on gripped me. I had to disappear before the farmer who owned these fields came into sight. Who knew how close to the farmhouse these hay stacks might be? What should I do? Where should I go? I was alone, without parents, without friends to help me, without a country to protect me. Fear threatened to overwhelm me. I was a hunted creature, in an occupied country. The Nazis might search the surrounding fields when they failed to find the Jews missing from the village. If they found me I would surely die. No! I wanted to live!

Suddenly the hay seemed stifling. I wiggled my way out, terrified of finding myself already discovered, despite the silence of the field. But no one was in the clearing. The rising sun reflected on the red, yellow and brown leaves of the trees—autumn glory which had always moved me before. I felt none of my former awe. A breeze rustled the leaves—a music once so sweet to me. I smelled wet earth, cut hay, distant woodsmoke—the smells of autumn. All of it left me unmoved.

I walked quickly on. Familiar ground was left behind. From a distance I saw farmers collecting the last of the harvest, and hoped they would not question my passing. Baskets of potatoes and beets were carried in from the fields. Grain was scattered to fat chickens and ducks. From afar I saw the farmers' pride and satisfaction in the way they straightened their backs from their labors. This land was rich; the harvest was abundant. The rigors of harvest behind them, the farmers were looking forward to winter talks by the fire, to the slower rhythm of life after

nature's plenty lay heaped in root cellars and barns. I had worked as hard as any of them. So had my parents, in the town, and my friends—all the Jews of Urzedow. But none of us would taste the fattened chickens and ducks. None of us would enjoy the bounty of the harvest. We were hunted outcasts.

Where could I go? How would I live once winter came? My only bed could be in haystacks. My only food scraps begged from suspicious farmers. One hope kept me going. There had been rumours of partisans roaming the province, keeping out of sight in the forests. If I found them, perhaps I could join their bands and fight the invading Germans.

I began pretending I was a Christian. Driven by hunger to visit farmhouses, I crossed myself, blessed Jesus Christ, and asked for something to eat. I told the farmers the war had separated me from my family, and I was traveling to rejoin them. The farmers said little. Sometimes I was told to go. I read suspicion on their faces. Sometimes I was given a little soup or bread and asked to leave quickly.

Much later I realized I was crossing myself incorrectly. Instead of touching my chest, I touched my chin.

News of the roundup of Jews in Urzedow spread quickly. One farmer told me the SS were searching the woods for escaped Jews with trained dogs. Rewards were promised to anyone who killed or denounced a Jew. Any time I begged for food, I might be killed or captured. But what choice did I have? I did not have the skills or weapons to hunt for food in the woods. If I did not eat, I would soon be unable to walk. Every time I approached a farmhouse I quaked.

Two weeks passed in a blur of running, walking, searching the fields for a stray potato, begging and running some more. One night I made my way back toward the open fields near the

forest, searching for a haystack in which to conceal myself for the night. I saw something on the ground near the trees. Drawing closer, I saw the body of a boy, shot and left on the ground to rot. A large open wound stared from his head. His bloodstained, rigid face looked familiar. Perhaps I had seen him in Urzedow. Yes! He was a Jew who had escaped the roundup, only to be shot dead. The SS must be nearby. I wanted to run blindly into the dark, to put distance between myself and the dead boy. Were the SS watching me even now, closing in for another kill? I forced myself to stoop and touch the boy's dead flesh. I found it as cold as the night air. The body had lost all the warmth of life. Then he must have died hours, perhaps even days ago.

I ran, losing myself in the darkness of the woods. No matter how shaken, I was still alive. I moved on, stumbling, running, striking my head on branches and not caring, unable to rest until late into the night. Then I crawled under a dense tangle of vines, and fell into an exhausted sleep. Each hour of life I stole from the Nazis was precious.

"Is this how a fox feels when the farmers are after him?" I wondered. I wanted to scream into the night, "I am a man like you! Why do you hate me?"

One afternoon at the beginning of November I stopped at a prosperous-looking farmhouse to ask for food. Two other people had come to the same place—a woman and her daughter. When I arrived they were in conversation with the farmer. I gathered they, too, were Jewish.

"I am sorry, no. You cannot stay another night," the farmer said sadly.

The woman was short, matronly. Her pleasant face was twisted with desperation. "Please. Only one more night in the corner of your barn. No one will know. We are so quiet no one could ever hear us!"

Her daughter was dark-haired and beautiful, perhaps eighteen years old. She bit her lip as

her mother argued. "We will work. We work well."

"I wish I could let you stay another night," the farmer protested. "I have nothing against you. But you have to understand. I could be shot if the soldiers find you. My wife and children would be left alone in the world, with no one to fend for them" The farmer looked at the ground. He must have realized he was describing their own frightening predicament. "I am sorry. So sorry. Take the food and go."

The woman seized his hand. She knelt in the dirt. "I beg you. We have no place to go. No one to turn to."

"I cannot help that!" the farmer said loudly. "I am one man, and they have an army!"

He saw me hesitating a little distance away. He turned to me, embarrassment written on his plain face. Perhaps he regretted shouting at the woman. "Yes? You would like food, too? Come. I have some bread left. An egg. Wait here." He disappeared into the house.

I stepped forward gingerly, sorry for the woman's humiliation as she got to her feet. She nodded to me.

"I am David," I said, trying to soothe her. "You are running and hiding from the Germans like me?"

She cleared her throat. "Mrs. Baum." She gestured to her daughter. "Hanna." Hanna nodded shyly. The words spilled from Mrs. Baum's lips in a flood. She needed to tell her story to someone, anyone. Or maybe she wanted to explain why she had knelt in the dirt. "My daughter and I were in the country buying food from the farmers, the day the SS surrounded our town. We heard what had happened. We decided to escape instead of returning home. We were so afraid. Anything seemed better than facing the SS But if we had known what it would be like,

running—" Her voice cracked, then dropped. "We learned that the Germans took all the Jews away. They have taken away my husband and my other two children, I don't know where. How will we find them again? I don't know what they have done to them. Will I ever know?" Her voice failed her.

My heart ached for them. They did not look poor. Their clothing was modest but of good quality. All their lives they had been surrounded by the familiar—a good home, the love and support of family and friends. They had abandoned everything to run, to live a few more days or hours. They could not have imagined the consequences of their blind and desperate choice. Now they struggled to stay alive, as I did, searching for food and shelter every day, every night, in a hostile countryside. Their temporary freedom was a terrifying fight against hunger and cold. Survival was all that mattered.

The farmer returned with half a loaf of bread and a boiled egg. I had never been given so much. His eyes scanned the fields for signs of soldiers. No one was in sight. He shifted from foot to foot nervously.

"I can give you no more. Hide in the barn for an hour, all of you. But then you have to go."

"Thank you."

The barn was quiet. I gobbled down almost half of the bread, in my ravenous hunger. It was still warm. Saliva burst into my mouth at the taste of the egg. I could not remember anything tasting so good. The chickens were out in the yard, scratching for food. The farmer's cows grazed in a field close to the house. Sunlight slanted through high windows in the barn, warming the straw. We climbed into the hayloft. I lay down. It was a relief to be under a roof, even for an

hour. Mrs. Baum and her daughter lay down in the straw some distance from me. I heard the woman weep, "Moishe! Forgive me. God, help us all... " Hanna whispered inaudible words of comfort. Then exhaustion must have overcome Mrs. Baum. She fell asleep. I felt myself drifting off, too, lulled by the unaccustomed warmth and the food in my belly. Then I started awake, as the straw rustled next to me. Hanna had come to my side. There was dust from the road on her clothes, and straw in her hair, but she seemed even more beautiful for that.

"Excuse me," she said. She glanced back to where her mother snored softly in the straw. Her sad brown eyes met mine shyly. She said, "Before I die, I want to know a man."

CHAPTER 10 - The Desperate Decision

I was struck dumb by Hannah's words. In the small town where she had lived, girls were brought up strictly. Intimacy was never tolerated outside of marriage. What had she seen, what

fears had she lived through, to bring her to make such a brazen and courageous request?

"We... we must rest now," I said awkwardly. I glanced toward her mother: Mrs. Baum was sound asleep. We would not be interrupted, but still, I couldn't find a different reply.

I was attracted to her. What boy of my age would not have been? But all my thoughts were of the road ahead, how to avoid the Germans and find enough food for the winter, enough shelter against the cruel cold to come. I spoke of Urzedow and my parents instead. Hanna's eyes grew sadder. The farmer came to rouse us while we talked quietly.

"There is no one to see you leave, now. You must go quickly," the farmer warned us.

"Thank you," I said again. He hurried us along, but I felt only gratitude. He had been kinder than most. He was afraid of helping us any further. I remembered what my father had said about wars, how they take away men's spirits as well as their lives. I wondered how this farmer would have treated us if not for the German threat. He was a generous man.

I nodded and began to walk away. Mrs. Baum and Hannah shouldered their burdens—pitifully small sacks, and left the barn with me.

"What do we do, now?" the woman said. "Where do we go?"

Her pain and uncertainty seemed to crawl into my chest like a huge spider.

"Try sleeping in haystacks. That is what I do." I described how to twist into the centre of the hay, without disturbing it much. "I search the woods for the partisans—loyal Poles who still fight the Germans, living on the run like us. They must know how to survive in the woods. They could help you. I hope to join them and fight."

Mrs. Baum shook her head. "So many woods, too much to search. Who knows what wild animals we might meet there? And there is nothing to eat there. We would starve."

She gave me an imploring look. I did not know what she wanted from me. I had no brave words to offer, only my own fears. There was no easy path for any of us—only flight and begging, and the terrible doubts at each farmer's door—Will this man turn us over to the Nazis? Then I realized they wanted to travel with me, to have a strong boy at their sides. But the idea made me worry. We would look like a family then. Curiosity would be aroused. Villagers who might let me pass alone unquestioned, would ask who we were, where we were going. I was just another boy on the run now, slipping into the darkness and disappearing easily. But a family—that was enough to report to the Nazis. How would I hide this stout woman, who limped on blistered feet? How would I get them food? Farmers who had spared me a slice of bread would turn away three people. I knew it would be impossible. I had already run from farmers' dogs. How could Mrs. Baum get away quickly enough?

Suddenly I felt overwhelmed by the difficulties of providing for this mother and child. I wanted the comfort of their company; I wanted to help. But I knew I could not protect these women; I had nothing to offer. I had to leave them to fend for themselves, or we would perish together. The painful realization clogged my throat. My mouth was dry as I found hesitant words.

"Walk on from farm to farm. That is all we can do." I moved away from the house. "Good luck be with you!" My legs wanted to run toward the shelter of the trees. Every instant's delay was a terrible risk. I walked quickly toward the woods. When I had reached the shadow of the trees I looked back once and waved. Mrs. Baum and Hannah walked slowly along a rutted pathway. Shouldering my regret, I turned away.

That night in the haystack I could not sleep. Rain clouds had moved in before dark. I was soaked to the skin, and even the inside of the haystack was damp. Hanna's beautiful, shy smile,

her sad eyes and her shocking offer haunted me. A beautiful girl had asked me to make love with her. And I had done *nothing*! I had ignored her, talked of other things. Why hadn't I held her, kissed her? I should have. Hannah must have lost all hope of a normal life, of marriage and a future. Her request was a cry from a broken heart, a heart without hope. Her beauty, untouched as yet by hunger and the hardships of the road, had attracted me. For comfort and kindness alone, I should have held her. Why hadn't I?

I had ogled girls, imagined the touch of their hands and lips—the same as other boys. The war had come before I had experienced my first kiss. I was a normal teenaged boy. What was wrong with me? Had hunger and fatigue made me refuse Hannah? Or was it the fear of death—my only companion? Where was my compassion, my ordinary teenaged passion? What had the war done to me? Ashamed, I berated myself.

My memories of Szymek and letters written to him—these were the closest thing to friendship left in my life that night.

The long hours dragged by in silence. Then there was a loud rustling in the bushes nearby. I stiffened and strained to hear more. Something squeaked weakly. The bushes rustled. Probably some small animals were playing, or perhaps chasing their prey. It might be a fox. I thought of how a fox lives—at home in the woods, its claws and teeth adapted to hunting, its legs perfectly made for swift running. Warm in its thick coat of winter fur, the fox could find food any time of the year. It could sleep in its warm den when the winter became too harsh. If I were to survive here I would have to change into an animal. Could I do that? The heart within me quailed. And I thought, "Why should I have to?"

Outrage filled me. "What is wrong with being Jewish?" I asked myself. "I pose no threat

to the world. For this I have to die? I don't understand. *Why*?"

Out of nowhere, I recalled Professor Birn making us memorize a passage by Shylock in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

> "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,
> organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed
> with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
> to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed
> and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian
> is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we
> not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die?"

My life as a boy had been so ordinary, so innocent; the love of my parents so like the love of any doting parents for an only son. Their delight in my achievements when I graduated at the top of my class; their gentle chiding when I boasted too much of my knowledge, both so typical of parents everywhere. Like other parents they taught me honesty and good manners, justice and charity. Like other sons I hoped to relieve their poverty when my training as a textile designer in a trade school was finished. Papa had been as disappointed as I when the state supported high school would not enroll me because I was Jewish, but we coped with this by tutoring students and paying for a private school. Was this fair either? We had never been very religious, but we were as kind and generous as any Christians. Yet we were shunned and then condemned to death.

I was about to cry out loud "Why?" when a bitter wind blew through the wet straw, reminding me were I was. For weeks I had roamed the forest hoping to meet a partisan group, but my hope was turning to despair. There were ways a man could live in the wilderness, even in

winter. The partisans must know them. With their help I could learn how to trap animals, how to find wild roots safe to eat. I had tried to eat unknown berries once, but I had vomited up the bitter fruit. Ignorance of the wilderness could be as good a killer as a rifle bullet. I didn't know enough. My clothes were woefully inadequate, and I had no means to find better. I had left my well-worn winter coat behind in Urzedow. Hungry and poorly clad, I would succumb quickly to the cold. I would freeze to death. I could figure out how to make a shelter, in time. But there wasn't any time left. The harsh Polish winter was only one month away. Winter might be a more dangerous enemy now than the Nazis. That night I faced the fact squarely: I was not going to survive the freezing weather on the run. And no one would take in a Jew. I would die soon if I could not find another way.

Three days later as I begged food from a farmer, we fell into conversation. I dared to mention the partisans. The farmer must have been impressed by my flawless Polish. He spoke to me with respect and sympathy.

"I have heard that some groups of partisans are shooting the Jews who try to join them," he said. He shrugged an unspoken apology. "You are a patriot, an educated man. I can see that. It may be dangerous to approach the partisans, though. They might think you are a Jew." He went into the house and returned to hand me a heavy package of bread. I smelled butter and even a hint of sausage. He frowned. "I have heard that the Germans recruit many Christian Poles, both men and women, to work in decent camps in Germany."

I remembered overhearing at a village, weeks ago, that Jews were sent to slave labour, but young Poles were being taken to Germany to work for German industry. Recruiters promised food and lodgings. I had paid no attention at the time. Any word of Germany seemed too

frightening. But that day I listened with fresh interest. I wondered why the farmer had mentioned the Christian work camps in Germany. Surely he saw my predicament. Some impulse toward kindness might have made him speak of the camps. Perhaps he assumed I was a Christian, and suggested a way to survive the bitter winter. I seized on the idea.

"Is that true?" I said, careful to appear calm. "They are sent to work in decent conditions in Germany?"

"Heated camps," the farmer said, glancing at my thin clothing, "with fair rations of food. In Krasnik, about ten kilometers from Urzedow, there is a recruiting centre." He nodded his head in the direction from where I had come. "Walk safely, young man. These are dangerous times."

I thanked him. My feet carried me back to the woods before his words had fully penetrated. I stopped under a tree to eat. There was a small slice of sausage and butter on two thick slabs of black bread. Famished, I tore into the food. It was very hard to keep part of the bread for later, but I made myself do it.

An idea crept into my head—a risky, insane idea. My face was plain. I did not look Jewish. My build was short and slight, but I was strong and tanned from my summer's work. My muscles were firm. My hair had been shaved very short while I worked on the farm. I still looked presentable. Maybe, just maybe, I could pass for a Christian, even in the eyes of a German.

Once the idea took root, it quickly became a decision. I would pass myself off as a Christian Pole. Right now, the fact that I ran marked me as a Jew more than anything else. A few displaced Christian Poles roamed the countryside, but most of those on the run now were Jews, fleeing the Nazi roundups. What if I stopped running? What if I walked brazenly into a recruiting office, and gave a false Christian name? All it required was nerves of steel, and a place where no

one knew my face. I had never been to Krasnik. The chances of seeing someone I knew there were very small. Perhaps I could bring it off. If I did, I would avoid the slave labour camps like Janiszow. At all costs I must avoid them. Slow death by overwork and starvation—my vivid memories of Janiszow hinted at what that would be like. But in a camp where the food was sufficient, where the barracks were heated... I could work hard in such a place, and survive. Yes. I would do it. I would volunteer to work as a Christian Pole in Germany. A book I had read before the war mentioned safety in the lion's den. Perhaps I would be safer in a German camp than anywhere else.

The brash decision made, I turned and hurried back the way I had come. I would bypass the outskirts of Urzedow, and then head across the fields to Krasnik, ten kilometers away. Once there, I would go at once to the recruiting office. A name, what name would I give? If I made up a name, and they checked on it, I might be caught in my lie. I would use the name of a boy I knew by sight in Urzedow—Mieczyslaw Wosko. I had no papers, though. What if they asked for my birth certificate, or other identification? Quickly I made up a story. I had no papers because I had escaped from my stepfather who beat me and kept all my documents. At that time it was not easy for anyone to telephone another village If the Germans wanted to check out my story I would have time to leave town.

I would escape a winter death by masquerading as a Christian. I had no other choice.

The next morning I wandered the woodlands and the fields parallel but at a safe distance from the main road. I washed at a chilling stream, brushed off my clothes, and walked into the town of Krasnik. It was a typical Polish town, with farmhouses and then tighter-spaced houses and shops clustered around the main road and around the centre square. Side roads were of dirt.

A brave front, I told myself—that counted for everything. Act the part, and no one will doubt you. As if I hadn't a care in the world, I stopped passers by to ask where the recruitment office was. A helpful fellow showed me the way.

Suddenly, from around the corner a column of thin, sickly-looking young men appeared, guarded by the SS. They wore Stars of David sewn to a band on their arms, on top of their shabby gray clothes. They were Jews. The SS guards shouted at them and nudged them forward roughly with the butts of the rifles. Their eyes stared blindly from sockets hollowed by fatigue and hunger. Slave labourers. My blood ran cold. I could be among them. I stood aside to let them pass. The SS paid me no heed. I was still free. But for how long?

I walked further down the block, avoiding the turn toward the recruitment office. There must be another way! Why should I let myself be taken into the stronghold of the enemy, into Germany itself? Wouldn't I be in more danger there? Germany was at war with Poland. I would be one of the hated foe there, one of the subjugated peoples. Every hand would be raised against me.

But where else could I go? As soon as the sun set, curfew would take effect. Any man or boy not in his home would be arrested. No one here would give me shelter. If I asked for it, they might turn me over to the SS on the spot. And no one would give me food, either. In this town, informants might be anywhere. By turning in a stranger they might hope to save one of their own. How long could I last before I would be caught and enslaved, like the young men I had just seen?

I had no other alternative.

The day wore on. You have left the woods for a good reason, I told myself. Choose now, before you are discovered!

Prepared for the worst, I walked quickly toward the recruitment office—a plain wooden building. I stepped in boldly, and approached an official sitting at a desk.

"I would like to volunteer to work in Germany," I said.

The man turned bored eyes in my direction. "Name?"

"Mieczyslaw Wośko."

"Papers?"

I shrugged with embarrassment. "I don't have them with me. Sorry. My stepfather keeps them in a strongbox, and I ran away from him. He works me like an animal and beats me besides."

The man grunted. "Does your mother know you're here?"

I nodded. "She doesn't mind."

"Hm. It's none of my affair. You will need papers."

"I will only get another beating if I go back home now."

Another grunt. "It is more work for us this way. You are the second boy today without proper papers. Do you think we have nothing else to do? The identification form," he told a woman sitting at a typewriter next to him.

She put a new form into the machine and started typing. "Spell your name, please. Place of birth. Mother's name....."

To my relief they did not ask many questions. They seemed to be satisfied with my story. The woman filled in the form with my false identity. In a surprisingly short time she had handed me a slip of paper with my new Christian name on it, Mieczyslaw Wośko. I was no longer a Jew.

"Wait in there."

A larger room at the back of the house held other young men, waiting on benches. I sat in an empty space and waited silently. I kept my face blank, and tried to calm my hammering heart. Some of the boys talked with one another, but no one spoke to me.

It had worked! They thought I was a Christian. No one gave me a second look. Chaotic thoughts filled my mind. I concentrated on looking at ease and attracting no attention.

Soon all of us were loaded into a truck.

"You have taken the gamble now," I told myself. "You cannot turn back."

Was I traveling toward a safe haven in the cruel war, or toward my death?

CHAPTER 11 - I am Mieczyslaw Wośko

I studied the boys around me as the truck rolled north, on its way to a detention camp in Lublin. It was November, 1942. From that moment on, I knew nothing but my wits lay between me and the barrel of a gun. If my outrageous gamble was to succeed, I must blend in with these boys. I listened and tried to learn about them. How had they been recruited to work for the Germans? Because of food shortages? "No work anywhere," I heard some of them complain. Others had been selected by local authorities, forced to "volunteer." They were mostly young Polish laborers and farmhands. My first problem: their mannerisms were different from mine. Most spoke crudely, cursing often, and I guessed they had little education-probably less than four years of schooling. Levels of cursing seemed to define levels of society, I noticed. I never cursed, and spoke like a boy with more education: Jews were known to be better educated. All the recruits were Catholic Poles. Less educated Christians cursed often-using curses I'd never heard before. I saw one of the Christian boys cross himself, and realized how little I knew of Catholic gestures too. How could I hide my natural speaking voice, my ignorance of Christian curses and gestures?

Suddenly my life depended on my skill as an actor. I had to become like these boys: rough, rude, quick to curse, not for an hour or a day, but for every moment of every day for months, perhaps years. No hint of my true background could ever show. I was by nature open and straightforward. Father had ingrained in me the value of truth. Now my survival depended on a framework of lies. If anyone saw the real David Makow for an

instant, all my plans would be in vain. No actor ever had a higher stake in his performance. Could I do it?

A rebel voice inside me exclaimed -"You were insane to imagine this could succeed! What kind of madness gripped you? Get away!" But there could be no escape. I was listed on formal documents, under the relentless gaze of guards. Any of the boys around me, who glanced my way with curiosity now and then, could sound the alarm. I squashed the voice of protest inside me. After all my running I would not give in to panic now. I would see the gamble through, no matter what it took. No one would ever see through my act! Where my belly was queasy it would become stone. Keeping my own glance casual, I studied my role models for my part in the play.

My appearance would work in my favor. I had worked as a farmhand for the past year. Some of my habits had already roughened. My clothes were little more than rags. My hair was short and unruly. If I imitated the others well enough I might not be discovered.

The thought of working for Germany in any way sickened me. I would be very little help to them. But I would pretend. In the struggle against the enemy, survival was victory. Perhaps an opportunity to join the fight against the enemy would come. I would watch for it.

The truck rattled over fifty kilometers to Lublin. All the way I carefully kept my face blank. We drove into a fenced compound on the outskirts of the city. I looked for signs that this camp would be better than Janiszow.

The place was much larger-recruits from all over the province were being

collected for transport to Germany—from Polish boys thirteen, to men of thirty. Most were boys in their later teens, just beginning to be men. The same lines of gray barracks, bare of any comfort, met my eyes. We were assigned one bunk per man—such luxury! But the soup was as thin as that at Janiszow—hardly better than plain water. A stolen potato eaten in a haystack began to look good. I doubted the wisdom of my gamble, as my empty belly rumbled.

In order to avoid standing out as "the silent one," I practiced some new rough conversation with a few men and boys, cursing the soup and hoping for better in the work camp. This was easy conversation, boys muttering to each other as they ate.

"This frickin' soup is a joke."

"It isn't soup. It's ditch water."

"They offered us good food and shelter for labor. A criminal in prison gets better than this!"

"They told us we were valuable—our labor would be important! So why are we being fed less than cattle?"

"Didn't you know? To a German soldier Poles are hardly better than cattle!"

"This camp is only a stop. We'll be in Germany soon. That's where they ship all the food taken from our farms. They'll feed us better there."

"They'll have to, if they don't want their workers to starve!"

From one of the boys, a husky farmer named Wojtek, I learned a whole string of new curses. He was a talkative fellow, friendly enough. I began to feel a little safer, lost in the crowd of recruits. Among them I could avoid the attention of the guards. But roll calls

filled me with dread. As I answered, "Here," to my fake name, Mieczyslaw Wośko, for an instant all eyes turned to me. I might as well have been under a magnifying glass. Could I avoid that moment of scrutiny? At roll calls we were assigned a day of transport. Everyone had to answer.

Wojtek stood next to me one day in the privy as I pissed and joked about our future wages. "We will grow rich, no?" he said.

"Maybe." I summoned a false smile.

"If a man had a little money going into the work camp, I reckon that would help."

"For what?"

He shrugged. "Extra bread, a new shirt." His shirt was shabby—even thinner than mine. "A few zlotys always help." He gave me a measuring glance. "Were your wages so bad at your last job?"

I grunted. "Are they good anywhere in these cursed times?"

"A man might do a favor for a little..." He rubbed his fingers together.

We walked out of the privy together. "How little?"

"A few zlotys. Maybe you want to nap during roll call."

Had my nervousness been so obvious, in spite of my care to look unconcerned? But he gave me an idea.

I hesitated. "You will get a good work assignment, a strong man like you. I want one too, but if the Germans notice my limp." I had some blisters on my feet, and limped a little after my long weeks of walking. "Maybe you would step in for me?"

"When do they call your transport?"

"The day after tomorrow."

Wojtek smiled. "Easy. I don't leave for three days after that. I can step forward for you, then slip out of the line. You slip in after. Forty zlotys."

"For something so easy, ten."

"For ten, it isn't worth my while."

We settled on twenty zlotys—a whole week's wages on the farm.

"Don't worry, my friend." Wojtek slapped me on the back as he took the last of my money. "As good as done."

I wonder if relief showed in my face. A little extra safety-one reprieve from the attention of the guards-in return for all my money. I would stay hidden a while longer. The guards weren't brutal, but they watched, and the rifles slung over their shoulders were threat enough.

The next day harsh shouts and furious pounding on our doors summoned us to the square.

"All recruits out! Form your lines!" the guards ordered.

"What's going on?" a barrack mate asked, puzzled. "It's not time for roll call."

We stumbled out and assembled in lines. "My identity has been uncovered," I thought, my stomach sick. But someone else cried out. Two guards dragged a boy, younger and smaller than me, into the center of the square.

"Lies! Lies!" the boy wept. "It isn't true—" He babbled his innocence to the listening air. The guards might have been deaf. They forced him to his knees in the dirt.

"Quiet, you scum!"

Without another word one of the guards pulled his pistol from his belt and shot the boy in the head. The boy's body fell to the ground, limp and horribly silent. The echo of the shot penetrated my chest like a blade. This was a cleaner death than Shlomo's, but the boy was still dead.

"This is what happens to Jews who try to hide among true Poles," a guard said loudly.

I struggled to keep my face blank in the terrible following silence. I am like him, my blood shrieked. When will you shoot me? But I could not show the terror coursing through my limbs. Fear would be noticed. Fear would cry out my racial guilt for all to hear. I might as well confess as show my dread of discovery. I must appear confident instead, unfeeling.

Who had betrayed him? What had he done to give himself away? A stray word or gesture, perhaps, unthinkingly said or done in a moment of distraction? Or a bribe to stay hidden?

Then I saw the reactions of the men and boys around me, and my bowels twitched. The guards smirked their satisfaction and hatred. Some camp inmates turned their heads in disgust, but others cursed the victim, "Filthy Jew! Serves him right!" The day before they had joked with him, all easy camaraderie. How much can change with a single word—Jew! I thought, "He's the same boy as yesterday. Can't you see?" But I said nothing. I did nothing. One wrong word, and I too would be discovered and killed.

The body was taken away by a guard, limbs swinging over his shoulder like a broken doll's.

That night I could not sleep. The scene in the square replayed in my mind a thousand times. But the boy's face seemed to melt, his features blurring. When it grew still again the face was my own.

Early the next morning we lined up in the square. Thin, icy rain was falling, soaking through my shirt, chilling me to the bone. The roll call began. When the German soldier in charge called, "Mieczyslaw Wośko," I nearly jumped.

I waited for Wojtek to step forward in my place, as agreed. Nothing happened. Out of the corner of my eye I spotted him near the end of the row. He gazed in the opposite direction, ignoring the call. I knew then he wouldn't help me. Why? Had he changed his mind? Was he afraid? Or had he guessed that I was a Jew?

"Mieczyslaw Wośko, step forward!" There was irritation in the guard's voice. He scanned the line, frowning. Every instant I delayed only aroused their suspicions more. I stepped forward. I don't think I heard the rest of the roll call.

"Move!" the guard barked at us, when everyone was accounted for. He herded us toward a large bathhouse. "Undress and shower."

Some men muttered. "What do they think we are? We are Poles, not filthy Jews!" a tall fellow growled.

"No talking!" the guard shouted.

The grumbling was silenced. Numbly, I stripped off my clothing like the rest. We were to be inspected naked. What could I do? I had to follow the rest. Once my trousers were off, my Jewish identity would be clearly revealed. I had been circumcised, like all Jews, at my *bris*. Christian Poles never circumcised their boys. The difference in my

genitals would be my undoing.

None of the boys noticed me as they undressed. They were too busy stripping to look around. Then we were hurried into the showers. The haste worked in my favor.

Jets of cold water knifed over us. We all shook from the cold. Curses filled the air, as boys chafed their arms in a vain effort to get warm. Still dripping wet, we lined up inside a large room. A doctor sat against the far wall behind a small table. Next to him stood an armed, black-uniformed SS officer. I trembled as I saw him. Gradually I had learned that it was the special job of the SS to hunt down and transport Jews. I held my hands in front of my genitals. Many other boys did the same, their humiliation obvious.

The guards prodded the line. One by one we shuffled toward the doctor and the SS guard. The inspection was brief, the doctor curt and efficient. Our line moved along too quickly. The SS officer's eyes were gray stone, flicking over us. I counted the boys and young men between me and the front of the line--three more, two, one. Too soon my turn had come. I stepped well forward, hoping the rim of the table would hide my penis.

"*Zurück stehen*," the doctor barked. "Stand back. Hands at your sides."

I stopped breathing. I put my rigid hands at my sides, I took a step backward, and waited for the shout of accusation. The doctor's eyes looked me over coldly. The SS officer seemed bored. My muscles had turned to water. "I'm a Jew! I'm a Jew," my nakedness shouted for all to hear. How could they fail to see?

"Okay," the doctor said, "next."

Stunned by relief, I moved on. Why had the doctor passed me? Didn't he notice? Did he know, and pass me anyway -- an act of decency in the midst of the long ordeal of

the war? Or maybe he just didn't care. I might never know. Gratitude flooded my shuddering body. Quickly I found my heap of clothes. My numb fingers fumbled as I eagerly dressed. Maybe my plan would really work! I would make it to Germany disguised as a Catholic Pole. What a slap in the face to the Führer and his generals!

I knew there were a hundred other dangers of discovery ahead. The odds in my chosen gamble were overwhelmingly stacked against me. I wouldn't be able to relax for an instant. I couldn't tell anyone who I was. Anyone could condemn me to death with a word. I had never felt so alone. I had never prayed much, but words rose inside me like a prayer-- "Don't let them find me. I want to live!"

CHAPTER 12 - Into Hitler's Stronghold

The guards ignored me for the rest of the day. Being short and of average appearance worked in my favor. They herded us onto a train later that evening. "Those for transport, into the cars!" They motioned with their rifles to hurry us along.

About eighty men and boys hoisted themselves into the dim shadows of a waiting train car. I couldn't believe my eyes. I expected something like the third-class carriages cars in which I had traveled on my holidays: hard wooden seats, crude luggage racks. But the car to carry us to Germany was empty except for a scattering of straw on the floor, like the car that had carried us from Lódz to Zaklikow: a bare dirty box, about fifteen meters long and two-and-a-half meters wide, built of rough wood. An icy wind blew through the wooden slats of the walls. The single tiny window was set high on one wall—too high to see out, unless someone was able to climb on the shoulders of others. We wouldn't be able to see where we were going. At the sight of the bare car, some of the men swore and tried to pull back but the guards with their rifles were at our backs. Long after the car was full, men piled in—most of them young, like me, and a few much older.

I struggled to keep my head. I stretched out quickly on the floor, wedged between two older men, knowing that soon there would be no place to lie down and rest. Others leaned against the walls with their legs over other men's bodies. They would have to spend the journey sitting uncomfortably. Real sleep would probably be impossible for them.

"What do they think we are?" one fellow grumbled. "Stinking sheep?"

"Why don't you go ask the guard? He'll be glad to explain, with a bullet."

"All Poles are cheap to the Germans. Almost as cheap as Jewish pig-crap."

I had already hardened myself to this kind of talk. I didn't react. I sat listening, like a boiled potato. Professor Birn had caught me distracted once and said I made as good a potato as a boy. How the class laughed! But on the train I was proud of my skill at looking indifferent.

Some young men swore as they jostled for a place. Silence fell over the rest of us. We waited for the train to move. Everyone was shocked at this kind of transport.

My mind was harder to control than my face. I kept wondering, with a twist of fear in my belly, why they were shipping their laborers like living corpses? Was the promise of work a fiction? Was this a death-train, as I had heard described in rumors? One small comfort remained. My identity was hidden in the tangle of bodies, giving me a brief illusion of safety.

"Are they going to leave us here all night?" one man grunted.

"Where are we supposed to piss?"

"Pick a corner," someone said coarsely.

Why the delay? Had Wojtek tipped them off? Were they searching for a Jew in the

transport group? Hours passed as we waited. A thousand phantom voices of discovery vibrated in my head.

At last the train began to move. The wheels rolled on hard rails. Their rhythm reminded me of a love song played on the radio before the war, about undying love. I

used to hum it as I admired Sonia's legs at school. She had caught me staring once and chased me away. Did memories like this help me or make the journey harder? Perhaps it was good to remember what ordinary life was like.

Dusky light from the window faded to inky blackness. I could not see the back of the man in front of me. Someone crawled over me, heading for the latrine corner. Curses followed him as he stepped on bellies and faces in the darkness. I fell into a fitful sleep.

As the night passed, the train jerked to a stop several times, so roughly that I snapped awake to stare at the darkness. I choked on the stench of the latrine corner, and could not seem to get my breath. I wished the door could be opened, in spite of the cold.

"Where are we?" men muttered at each stop. "Have we arrived?"

"Let us out of here!" But the door stayed shut bolted from the outside. The train speeded up again. We passed small villages. Lights flickered through the slits of the door. Silence fell, as exhaustion overcame all questions. Those who could, slept. I drifted in and out of fitful dreams peopled by black, faceless uniforms.

Suddenly a voice cut through the rank night air like a knife. "There is a Jew among us!"

Was this a nightmare, born of my fears? No. The voice was real. The hatred in it tore at my belly. I waited in silence while my mind raced. Who knew that I was one of the hated, hunted Jews? Only Wojtek could have guessed. But he wasn't on our transport. Could he have spread the word? I couldn't tell who had spoken, or how many knew the truth. I waited for hard hands to seize me, for my fellow Poles to haul me out of the stacked human cargo. But nobody reacted. Nothing happened. "Maybe no one knows

who I am yet," I told myself. "For a few more hours darkness can hide me. But what will happen at dawn—only a few short hours away? Will these men turn their fear and rage on me?" It would have been so easy to give in to panic, to let down my barriers.

I guessed the train had traveled westward. When it stopped in Bedzin I heard the station master's shout. Hours studying Father's map held me in good stead now. I could picture our journey in my head. Or what I guessed it to be. I used these speculations to calm my wildly beating heart. Slivers of pale light penetrated the window. Dawn eroded my camouflage. My performance began. No one spoke the word *Jew* again, though I tensed my body for it, as if for a blow. In Radom, the next station, the door opened. Icy fresh air flooded the wagon. Guards threw some bread and bottles of water into our midst. The door thudded shut. The bolt was shoved home. Almost at once the train lurched forward.

Young and grown men rushed for the food and water. There was so little; there were so many of us. Arguments broke out at once.

"Share it, you pig!"

"Get off me, swine!"

"If we take turns-"

Thirst and hunger were louder than reason. I tore a small hunk of bread from a loaf before it was seized from my hands. I clawed as rudely as the rest, but I couldn't get near the water bottles. I strained in the crowd to stay upright, as I was shoved from side to side. Chaos reigned until, in the melee, one of the bottles fell and broke. The precious water leaked away through gaps in the filthy floor. I am ashamed of what I felt at that

moment. I think I could have struck the man who smashed that bottle. Maybe I wouldn't have to act so much after all. Desperate need strips a man of self-control so quickly. One of the boys sobbed.

"There, see what you've done, fool?"

"If you hadn't pushed your stinking elbow in my face-"

"Leave it alone! What's done is done! Pass the water hand to hand, now, like civilized men! Who has had none?" This voice was loud and commanding. The jostling mass of humanity settled. I looked toward the man who had spoken, immensely grateful that he was on this transport. But the crush of bodies hid him from me. It wasn't safe to move closer to him or to speak. I would have to wait. When the bottle came my way, it was nearly empty. I took one long sip and passed it on, my mouth still dry, but ashamed enough to control my fierce thirst.

"You can't mean it's all gone!" a man near the end of the line said.

"There has to be more."

A boy scrabbled on his hands and knees for a shred of bread dropped on the floor.

Someone hammered on the door of the moving train and shouted, "Feed us like men!" though no one was there to hear.

"You expect the Germans to suddenly like Poles? We're slaves to them! Nothing more."

"Even slaves have to eat and drink!"

The train rumbled on, unheeding, uncaring. I tried not to think about cool streams of water.

At Tòmaszow we stopped again and waited there all afternoon. The December darkness came early. I pretended to doze and uttered hardly a word. There was no more bread or water. The door stayed closed, and the man who had shouted for more food did not dare speak up while guards stood on the platform. Then we traveled westward again. I wondered if we would pass through Lódz. An hour later I glimpsed dense buildings. It was dark when we pulled into a station. A siren startled me.

"*Lódz Fabryczna!*" a loudspeaker announced. "Lódz Station."

"I'm home," I thought. "If I call loudly enough, my friends will hear me. Nearly everyone I care about is almost close enough to touch!' But walls, guns and guards separated us. Being so close to Szymek, my dearest friend, and so impossibly apart was a torment for me worse than thirst. I would have given a whole day's bread and water to see him, to grip his hand and know he was well.

A welter of questions boiled up inside me: Where are my parents? Alive or dead? And my home? Abandoned, or with someone else living in it? In the Lódz ghetto-my friends, my schoolmates, my teachers would be struggling. If I had chosen differently, I'd still be together with them all. Facing what? I was afraid for all Jews crowded into the ghetto. I wondered, "What are the Nazis doing to Szymek and his family?"

I don't know how long I lay there, as if in a fever, haunted by memories and fears. With sudden cruel clarity pictures from my childhood flashed on my inner eye: by the time I was six Papa had taught me the names of all the capitals of the world, and I was proud of my accomplishments. I teased friends with exotic names like Tegucigalpa in Honduras, Tananarife in Madagascar, Ulan Bator in Mongolia. I remembered Szymek,

Salek and I sitting at Papa's feet as wondrous stories, gathered from his reading, unfolded. Salek fell asleep beside us.

I could hear each voice, I could see each dear face, as I lay, tortured by hunger and thirst, in the cattle car:

Szymek and I used to hide behind the sofa when the landlord made his monthly visit. "Can I help that you are poor? Pay me what you owe." "Just another week, and I will get my pay from my job at the Association of Engineers and Architects," Papa always pleaded. "Three of the students I tutor owe me money too." Grumbling, the landlord left. Again I saw Szymek imitate his swaggering walk so well that I laughed, and stopped worrying.

We behaved better when mother's customers came for fittings of their made-to-measure shirts.

I remembered the taste of a banana-my birthday present one year. And Mama's lowered eyes as she handed me a watch made out of paper another year. And the candlelight on our faces, her soft voice singing the Sabbath song, Friday nights.

We used to spend Saturday afternoons in the park. In autumn the leaves were a yellow and red glory amid the fallen chestnuts, smelling of rain. Szymek and I harvested them, and made gifts for the girls at school. Men played chess under the spreading trees. Other men watched and commented while the fall sunshine warmed us. We boys followed the play, sometimes joining in the discussion shyly. Father usually explored controversial subjects with friends.

"It is a mistake to think we Jews are a chosen people, or our religion more holy

than any other man's," he often said thoughtfully, "for we know that all religions have ethical laws. Judaism is about justice and charity, about searching for meaning and about living an upright life!"

"Soon you will be saying all people are equal, Henryk," Brzezinski responded. Papa nodded. "You are a rebel!" Brzezinski accused Papa. "You don't go to synagogue except on the holy days. Are you not a Jew?"

"I am, whether I go on only the holy days or not. Being a Jew means living an upright life, with integrity and good will."

I remembered my father's sadness when the inexpensive Polish High School refused to enroll me because I was Jewish, and I had to study in a private trade high school. He had hoped I would find a way to further my education, beyond the limits of that school, and the textile trade.

What would happen to all our plans now? Would we even live to care?

Most of the transportees fell asleep, and some continued to talk in low voices. We waited at the Lódz station all night. I dozed off. At dawn a siren jolted me awake and the train pulled out of the station. I whispered, "Keep alive, Szymek my friend, until we can be together again!"

I had never felt more lost than at that moment, leaving Lódz and all my friends behind, perhaps forever. I promised myself I would find Szymek, no matter what it took, when the war was over. I would take him to a fine beer parlor and buy him the best brew in the house. I swore we would drink until all the pain of separation was washed away, until the hideous war was washed from our memories.

Daylight struggled to fill the moving cattle car, throwing changing shadows over the throng of men and boys. Lódz had been left far behind. The murmur of voices around me comforted me until I heard the word, *Jews* from the far corner of the railcar.

"The Jews are to blame for all of Poland's suffering."

"There would be no war if the Jews hadn't started it."

This was common enough nonsense. I had heard it before. But my blood chilled at the next words. The loudest boy, Stephan spoke up. "There is a Jew here in this wagon! We must expose him."

Stephan must have learned about me from Wojtek, at the camp, as I'd feared. I was frozen. I did not know what to do or think.

"If we found him and exposed him now, the Germans would reward us."

But Stephan didn't look my way. Maybe he didn't know the Jew was me. "The Jews killed our God Jesus. The minister said it in church."

"True, Stephan!" another man muttered.

"They kill Christian children and drain their blood to make Passover pancakes."

"I heard this too!" agreed another. This hideous old superstition made me wince, as it always did. How could anyone believe such ridiculous lies? These stupid tales lived on only because Jews and Christians never mixed much socially. Because we kept to ourselves, prejudices could flourish. I realized this was a mistake. Neither Christian nor Jew understood one another.

"Jews are not born like human babies, like you and me. They are hatched from eggs-born like worms and insects."

Once I howled with laughter at hearing this tale, sure that no intelligent man could possibly believe it. I couldn't laugh any more. The recruits were convinced of its truth. Men like them used this degrading rubbish to excuse the murder of thousands of innocent Jews in pogroms. Bile rose to my throat. But I said nothing. How could I?

"Hitler is doing one great thing-he is weeding out the Jews from Poland for us. But they keep coming back like stinging nettles in a field crop." "Always it has been this way," a boy agreed.

No, this is not true, I wanted to cry out. We Jews built Polish commerce, made clothes and shoes for Christians, and sold them on credit. We were part of Poland's life, giving as much as any Christian. Many of the factories in Lódz were owned by Jews, and a large number of the businesses-or at least they had been until Hitler's troops confiscated them. For hundred of years Jews had been the backbone of the Polish economy. How could the boys ignore this?

"We can't allow the Jew to pass himself off as a virtuous Pole. He should get what he deserves. We have to find him and hand him over to the Germans!"

Stephan's words had power. The group around him had become angry. Three of the biggest men jumped to their feet. "Yes, let's find the Jew now!"

Accusing eyes swept over the rest of us, searching, searching. Many seemed to approve the plan.

I could not move. My throat had closed on my outrage and fear. To reveal these feelings would be a death sentence. The Germans are enemies of all Poles, I wanted to shout at them. You saw the tanks and troops take over our country. Can't you see Hitler

for the monster he is?

Then a man stood up facing the men on their feet, matching them in size. "You are a stupid peasant, Stephan." His voice dripped with scorn. Stephan flushed with rage and the men at his side hesitated.

"But Wladek-"

He cut Stephan off. "Any fool can see we are all in the same boat." This was the commanding voice I had heard before, telling us to share the water. Wladek stood as solid as a tree, while the others wavered. His eyes bored into each man. "The Germans will finish off the Jews first, then they will finish off all Poles! Do you know how many educated Poles and officers have been shot or have disappeared, never to be heard from again?" Stephan didn't answer, but two of the men lowered their eyes. "Jews are Polish citizens. Have you forgotten? They were invited to settle in Poland centuries ago. They fought for Polish independence during the last war. Many Jews died for our freedom. If all Poles, Christians and Jews alike, do not unite to fight the Germans now, we will all perish together!"

Those who had spoken so hotly a few minutes ago, sat down.

"You are an ignorant peasant, Stephan," Wladek said again. "You are just repeating lies. We should have compassion for all our fellow Poles, including the Jews and the terrible things happening to them."

"Why do you defend the Jews?" Stephan said hotly. "Maybe you are a Jew or a communist yourself!"

Wladek just laughed. His confidence and air of authority spoke louder than words.

Stephan was silenced for the moment, but he was also shamed in front of the others. He stared around with smoldering eyes. I knew Stephan would hate the more bitterly for this defeat, and the search would resume later.

There would be no safety among the recruits for me. Whatever made me think so?

Talk of Jews ceased for the moment. Rumors of the war took up the men's attention. I lay in silence, calming my hammering heart. How long before Stephan guessed I was the Jew?

We passed through small towns and villages that day, announced by muted voices at each station. The German names of the villages told me we had entered Germany itself-the Nazi "Fatherland"-Hitler's stronghold, where he held unquestioned authority. At dusk we arrived at Halle, a large German city, and the train stopped. After a while the big doors opened.

"*Alle 'raus, alle 'raus!*" guards shouted. "All out, all out."

I stumbled with the others out of the cattle car, into a black, cold night. Not a light could be seen, except dim searchlights overhead, scanning the skies. Explosions sounded in the distance. It must have been an air raid by the British or Americans. How long we had waited for them to come to our rescue, and there I was, likely to be killed by their bombs! This was a bad joke.

Stiff with the cold, we were herded into a big square. I could just make out the shape of buildings all around. The guards were old men in uniforms. One suddenly spoke to me.

"*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*"-"Do you speak German?" he asked.

Without thinking I answered, "Yes." Before half a dozen German words had passed my lips I realized my mistake. Christian Poles from the countryside seldom knew German, but many Jews could speak the language. This was well known. I had studied German for two years in high school, and had practiced a little since. What was wrong with me? Was I such a child, such an idiot, that I could not resist showing off my knowledge? I had vowed to be such a good actor, and at the first test, I forgot everything and gave myself away! Szymek always told me I was inclined to boast. It seemed like a poor reason to die. I felt like a fool.

Once started, I could not stop, of course. So the guard and I talked in German, politely, quietly, among the other Poles waiting in the black night.

Then the guard casually fingered his rifle and asked, "*Sind Sie Jude?*"-"Are you a Jew?"

Time seemed to stop. After all I had done, my lucky breaks and life-and-death decisions, after all the games of chance I had won with the Devil, had it come to an end now?

Every step of the past three years flashed before my eyes, as I saw the guard reach toward his rifle and smile.

CHAPTER 13 - Camp Vogelgesang

"Are you a Jew?" The question, asked so casually, hung like a poised hammer in the night air. The German guard looked at me with a mild expression, hands on his rifle.

I summoned a forced laugh. "If I hate anybody a lot, it is the Jews I hate. No, I am a Catholic Pole."

I spoke the words with conviction. The performance was so good I nearly convinced myself. The guard did not answer. I had no way of gauging whether he believed me or not. Professor Birn had taught us a Shakespearean expression-that cowards died a thousand deaths, a brave man only once. If so, I must be a coward, because I seemed to die a death of fear many times that night, standing beside that silent guard, listening to shells explode in the dark. The only real punishment I could remember in my childhood was for telling a lie-Papa had me stand in a corner for an hour. The lie I had told the guard burned in my throat. Who did I think I could fool, with my awkward falsehood? Now when I died, I would die a traitor to my people.

The other recruits shivered next to me. Bombs smashed the city of Halle, a few thousand yards away, shattering the night with flashes of light and the thunder of detonations. I am not ready for this, I thought. I am not prepared to curse my own people in order to survive. It is too much like standing beside the executioners when the bullets fly.

An eternity seemed to pass while we stood, listening to keening of falling bombs, feeling the ground rumble beneath our feet and concussions split the air. "Is this war?" I

asked myself. Standing like statues, waiting for death to fall out of the sky? Explosions in the distance were followed by the shrill of sirens. The air raid lasted about twenty minutes. I thought of the people in the city beyond us-women and children crouching in air raid shelters or their cellars, while shells exploded above. We workers were not considered valuable enough to put in a shelter. When silence fell at last I heard curses around me.

"God's blood, that was too close! I don't want to die in the country of our enemy."

"I've never seen anything like that."

"Where have you been living? We're in a war."

"Some Germans have been killed tonight."

They muttered quietly, but I thought they were taking a big chance. What if the guard had understood them?

"Move out. It's over now," the guard said.

The others didn't understand his German orders, but his gesture with the rifle was clear enough. A large warehouse stood near where the train had stopped. The guard threw wide the doors and motioned us inside. There were already hundreds of men and boys from several train wagons inside. Hungry, thirsty and cold, we stretched out on the concrete floor for the night. Sleep eluded me. A few recruits whispered.

"Luxurious accommodations! Just what the Führer promised!"

"It's better than the train."

"It's worse. The floor is harder."

It was a relief to be less crowded-to be able to breathe without the stench of the

cattle car in my nose, but I could not relax. I hoped that I would stay lost in the crowd, now-that my mistake in speaking German would pass by. If not, this might be the last night of my life. There was no escaping this warehouse, nowhere to run.

In the morning my body ached from lying on cold concrete. The guards threw open the doors and divided the throng of detainees into groups.

"*Raus! 'Raus!*"-"Okay quickly, now!" My group, about eighty boys and young men, gathered where the guards beckoned.

A clear voice called out, "*Wo ist der Mann der spricht Deutsch?*"-"Where is the man who speaks German?"

It was the guard from the night before. I had been expecting and dreading this call. He must have guessed I was Jewish, and now he was going to hand me over to the Gestapo. His eyes raked the group. Silence would not protect me. With a sinking feeling I stepped forward.

"It's me," I said. I had promised myself that I would speak no more against my race, that I would die cleanly now I had been caught.

The guard nodded. "Could you please translate the following into Polish for me?" he asked.

I barely managed to keep my composure. I nodded.

"You lucky recruits have arrived in the Fatherland, now. It will be your privilege to work for the Reich. You will receive wages, food and housing. You will be taken to your camp now. There is the truck to take you to your new home. March now, in good order."

He pointed to a truck waiting in the distance. Other recruits were sent in other directions. As we marched toward the truck, I recognized some faces from the cattle car. Wladek was there. I did not see Stephan. Pleased at his absence, I crowded onto the truck, and we were soon speeding along a road ever deeper into Germany.

"I thought we would die last night," one of the boys said.

"Have you never been near a bombing before?"

"No. It was terrifying. God help us if the allies bomb us now!"

"If you wanted to avoid being bombed with the Germans, you should have stayed home!"

"I didn't have a choice! The local administration recruited me."

We drove through flat, frozen, empty fields, past a few stands of forest. The crops had long since been harvested, and there were no signs of farmers. We lurched from side to side as the truck drove through ruts in the road. Hours later we arrived at a large fenced-in area, containing about twenty barracks. Soldiers opened the gate. A large sign proclaimed "*Lager Vogelgesang.*"

"What does *Lager Vogelgesang* mean?" a boy asked, knowing I spoke German.

"Camp Birdsong," I replied. "Maybe there are birds here."

The gate clanged shut behind us and the truck pulled up to a building. We piled out eagerly, all hoping for food. Two elderly Germans in brown military uniforms motioned us along. They looked mild enough-men too old for service at the front, assigned to duty in the homeland. But their rifles were as threatening as ever. We were allowed to file through a latrine, then we lined up at the building entrance and looked

around. I managed to stand next to Wladek-the one reasonable man that I felt I could trust. A tantalizing odor of cooking sausage made saliva burst in my dry mouth.

"God, do you smell that?" the man behind me said.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I swear that is meat! Do you know how long it is since I tasted meat?" another said.

"Almost as long as it's been since I saw a naked woman."

"You never saw a naked woman, Boleslaw! You talk a good story, but you lie."

"Back in line," the guard warned. "Papers first, before food."

"Anything, if it gets me sausages!" a boy muttered.

Wladek smiled at me and shook his head. "If these boys think the Germans will feed us sausages, they are sadly mistaken."

"Who do you think the sausages are for?" I asked him.

"The Germans, who else?" He gave me a penetrating look. "Did you like your translation duties?"

He might have suspected I was a Jew. I fought a sudden feeling of panic. But his look was sympathetic. "No," I admitted.

"Don't worry. I know German, too. Probably not as well as you," another look, "but I studied it in school."

"Wladek," he said, holding out his hand.

"Miecio," I replied, giving him the short form of my assumed name. I squashed my fears and shook his hand. His grip was firm and friendly. I suddenly wondered if he were trying to reassure me.

"Where did you go to school?" I asked, forcing the ordinary question past the constriction in my throat.

"I graduated from the state high school in Lublin. I come from Ostoweic, near Lublin. And you?"

"I come from Urzedow. How did you get here?"

"Ah," he laughed, then he lowered his voice. "I did a very foolish thing. I organized a school for the local boys in my town. I taught basic reading and writing, and racial equality. You know the Germans believe they are the master race?"

"I have heard it."

"Well, that would be silly enough if that's where it ended. But they give a rank to every other race, according to their 'purity of blood'-what nonsense!"

"Where are we Poles supposed to fit?"

He grinned. "Near the bottom, of course. The only people despised more than the Poles are the Gypsies and the Jews."

German disdain for Poles had almost slipped my mind, in my own fears. But at the word *Jews* my heart skipped a beat. Wladek went on, "I saw them round up Jews in our town, shoot the weak, and take the others away to hard labor. I told my students that these are crimes against humanity. The local SS learned about it. They beat me and shipped me to the transfer camp in Lublin. That's how I became a recruit."

Wladek's eyes were warm and intelligent. His speech was slow and careful. He was several years older than I, and it was a relief to find a mature mind that did not carry hatred for my people.

The German officials called for a translator then, and Wladek stepped forward. "I will translate." I could just see the harried official nod his thanks, and pass a remark about our barbaric tongue. Then he briefed Wladek about some rules and details of camp life. I breathed easier for the rest of the processing. I had escaped being singled out for my knowledge of German because of Wladek. He could be a friend. With Szymek so far away, I needed to make a few closer ties-even if they were based on a false name and identity.

One by one we showed our papers to an official. "Are all of this group Polish?" he asked Wladek.

"Yes. All loyal boys, all good workers."

"Assigned to manual labor. *Sheise*, they smell! Get moving, Polish dirt!"

"Who wouldn't smell after being transported in a cattle car?" a boy whispered. "They make us smelly, then they blame us for it."

For me, another lineup was another chance of being caught. I could tell, though, that none of my fellow Polish recruits felt lucky to be here.

A camera was set up next to the desks where an official checked names on a list. Another official drew a large letter P on a small slate with chalk-P for Polish, and above, a number. We held the slate against our chests, and we were photographed. With Wladek translating the German's orders, the line moved quickly. I handed over the papers given me in Lublin, and was issued an identity card with my new assumed name, my photo with the P and the number thirteen on it. My true identity disappeared. I gripped the new document firmly. It proved I was Mieczyslaw Wośko, a Catholic Pole.

"You will work in our munitions factories," Wladek translated.

"There's a place to be when the bombs fall!" a boy whispered.

"Jesus, I thought we would get decent work!"

After processing, we were assigned a barrack and a canteen. The smell of sausage disappeared as we walked deeper into the camp. Wladek fell in beside me. We glanced into other barracks as we marched past. They looked comfortable enough, but by then we were all thinking of our stomachs. We hadn't eaten since the train ride.

"Will they ever feed us?" boys grumbled.

The cold wind blew as we walked to the barrack assigned to us. A corridor bisected the building. Large rooms opened on each side off this central corridor. The rooms were Spartan, with wooden two-tiered bunk beds, three on each side, thin straw mattresses, ragged blankets and a bare bulb for light. Rapidly the guard assigned groups of twelve of us to a room. I grabbed the top bed in a bunk near the window. I reasoned I might be left alone there, in the cold corner of the room. At each end of the barrack a room for one person flanked the exits.

"*Kopfstube,*" the guard said, "The head room. That one's for you." He nodded to Wladek. In this way he was assigned to be our representative with the German authorities, and translator. I was glad. He would be fairer than most, and might be able to help us in small ways.

The other headroom had already been given to four Polish girls who must have arrived by another transport. The boys whistled when Wladek translated that piece of information.

"Girls! Who knew there would be girls here!"

"Girls can't resist me!"

"I can't wait to see them."

"Stay away from them!" Wladek advised.

No tables, no chairs, bare windows, not a single comfort relieved the monotony of the wooden walls.

"I saw pictures on the walls and nice furniture in another barrack we passed," a boy said. "Didn't you?"

"I couldn't see through the curtains. There are no curtains here."

"Do they call these rags blankets? These won't keep a man warm on a winter night!" another boy complained, looking at the bunk beds.

"It doesn't surprise me that our barrack is the worst in the camp," Wladek said to us. "Remember, the Germans think we Poles are a lower form of life."

"The food had better be good," a boy said.

We were all ravenous by then. By the time we got to the canteen we were happy enough to get a cup of brown water, loosely called coffee and bread with a small cube of margarine. Those who had hoped for sausages were disappointed. Later we learned that the tantalizing odors came from the German canteen. Wladek had been right. Since we had to show our pass each time we entered the canteen, we could not sneak into any of the others to sample their food. We gradually learned that our rations were the worst, like our barrack. The barrack for the German foremen and supervisors was the most luxurious, as befitted the master race.

"Where do we work?" the boys asked Wladek.

"The munitions factories are in that forest, about a mile away," Wladek said.

"Did you find out what is there?" one of the boys asked him, pointing towards the fenced-off end of the camp.

"Inside our camp there is another enclosed area with separate barracks," Wladek said. "Men and women captured from Russia and the Ukraine are held there. But in our main camp are other nationalities, like Italian, Dutch, Belgian and French. Each of them has their separate barrack, to avoid racial pollution."

His last remark was lost on everyone.

"Racial pollution?" one boy asked. "What do you mean?"

Wladek gave a mirthless smile. "The Germans believe they are the best, followed by the Italians, then the Dutch and then the Belgians. Even though they are a conquered people, Frenchmen are considered superior to Poles. We are not to mix with our betters!"

"We are every bit as good as any other men!" one of the boys said angrily.

"Yes, we are," Wladek agreed.

"Except for the Jews," one fellow said.

Some boys grunted their agreement.

"If you have one exception, then there is no equality at all," Wladek said. "If Christian men are equal, then Jewish men are equal in the sight of God and others. And our women are all as equal in God's sight too."

The boy shrugged. "We don't have to listen to you teach here."

"No," Wladek admitted. He sighed.

Exhausted by our long journey, we were soon ready to fall into the hard bunks. One of my roommates knelt by his bed, crossed himself and prayed before settling for sleep. I thought I should do the same. I crossed myself as I had before, touching my forehead, both cheeks and chin. Another boy, perched on an upper bunk across the room saw me.

"Miecio," he said, "you are crossing yourself like a Jew."

My stomach lurched. In my fatigue, I had forgotten the right way to do it. How easily I gave myself away, with one wrong gesture! I had no habits to save me. Showing a composure I did not feel, I laughed loudly.

"Oh, you didn't see. I did it right," I said.

It took all my self-control to calmly finish my silent prayers, repeat the right gesture, and climb into my bunk. Was the trail of suspicion from Lublin and the train transport following me? I promised myself to be more vigilant. As the others settled to sleep I waited to make sure they would not move against me in the darkness. When all were asleep, I allowed oblivion to take me.

The next day a guard appeared to march us to work. Out of the camp we went, through open fields and into a large, dark forest. Hidden among tall pine trees were munition factories, well camouflaged from air strikes. To hide them even more, the concrete bunkers that housed them were half buried in earthworks. Shovels were passed out, and wheelbarrows. Soon we were put to work covering a new bunker with four feet of dirt. Much of the soil was hardened by frost, and sometimes we had to use picks to break it up. The work was hard. Many of us shivered, because we had no warm clothes. I

resolved to wear my blanket under my clothes. If they didn't feed us better, this work in the bitter cold would gradually weaken us. With a sinking heart I realized I had come to a different Janiszow-bigger, perhaps less brutal, but probably as fatal in the end.

CHAPTER 14 - Two in the Lion's Den

Being constantly on guard against suspicion, pretending to feel what I did not feel, and look the part of a man I was not, increasingly tormented me. Anxiety became my daily bread. It churned in my stomach, impossible to digest. I wondered how long I could keep up the act.

Rumors began to circulate that there was a Jew hiding in a second Polish barrack. His name was Karol and he was about twenty years of age. His dark hair and eyes had made people notice him, and small differences in behavior betrayed him. Careful to call no additional attention to Karol or myself, I watched for an opportunity to speak to Karol unobserved. One day, after supper, I drew him behind the barracks-no one went there at that hour. To be sure of his identity, I turned the conversation to our respective families and our beloved hometowns. His responses convinced me he was Jewish. One last test.

"Karol. I have heard that there is a Jew in the Polish barracks."

Fear contorted his face. He looked ready to run. "Where have you heard this?" His eyes gave him away. I was certain!

"It's all right. Relax. I am a Jew pretending to be a Catholic," I said.

His relief was too obvious. He had not learned to hide his feelings. "Thank God," he said. "I need someone to talk to honestly. I am Jewish too," he confessed.

"Now there are two of us, but we must not be seen together too often."

He agreed. His tragic story spilled out of him, as if a dam holding floodwaters at bay had burst.

"My whole family was betrayed to the Nazis. They had been hiding in a Catholic farmer's basement-my mother, father, fiancée, and two sisters. I was out in the country trying to trade our last jewelry for some food when the SS found them. They took the farmer and my whole family to the Jewish cemetery. There they beat them, and forced them to dig their own graves. Then they made them kneel in the dirt and shot them. A neighbor told me." Tears ran down Karol's face. "Sometimes I wish I had died with them. I could not risk anyone else dying for my survival, so I took this chance, pretending to be a Catholic worker."

I told him my own story.

"How do you do it?" Karol asked.

"What?"

"I have seen you looking so cheerful and strong as you mix with the other recruits. How can you feel one way inside, and yet appear totally different? How can you go on with so much strength and courage without your loved ones, without even friends to talk to?"

"What choice have I got? It is the only way to survive here. And I promised my parents I would try to survive. My father said sometimes survival is the best kind of revenge," I said. "But questions plague me. Are they still alive? Are they well? Where are they? What happened after I ran? And what of my closest friend, who is trapped in the brutal Lódz ghetto? Sometimes when the questions get too much for me, I have to stop and live just in the moment."

"Live in the moment. I see. But that is not much of a comfort, is it? We are

helpless to aid our own people. We do not even know the truth of what is happening to them. We have been reduced to this terrible lie of pretending to be Christians, while other Christians slaughter our mothers and sisters. Where is our pride now, our self-respect? And even here, Hitler finds a way to exploit us. They expect us to do this backbreaking work and yet they don't give us enough to eat. We are their slaves!"

"But we can still help ourselves. All workers are given a ration of cigarettes-right? But some want more. Trade your cigarette rations for food. This has helped me." He nodded. His face was a map of loss and despair.

"Sometimes when I smile and curse, I feel a bit better," I confided. "And I talk to workers from foreign countries. They don't notice that I'm different from other Poles. There is less pressure with them." My suggestions seemed so inadequate.

"I want to cry all the time. I miss my family so much. And my fiancée Ryvka."

"Of course you must feel their loss terribly. But wouldn't they want you to survive?"

"I suppose so."

"I am sure they would understand your predicament. I don't mind talking with you like this, when no one can see us," I said. "It feels good to stop pretending for a few minutes. But we shouldn't meet too often."

He looked disappointed. "I guess not."

"Hold onto hope. That is what I try to do," I suggested.

"Hope for what? Will any of our people be alive when this is over?"

He had voiced my worst fear, and I could hardly reply. I searched for some

positive thing to say, "We are still young. If we can only survive, we still might build new lives in the future."

"Without the ones we love it seems pointless."

Nothing I said seemed to help him. But he embraced me as a brother, and told me speaking openly for a change was a big relief. We agreed to meet again in a few weeks.

CHAPTER 15 - Otto

Most of my companionship came from friends I was making among those from other countries. After the day's labor we were too tired for recreation. But some of the workers had been in the camp long before we arrived. They had begun to adapt. One young man had laboriously made a chess set out of small stones, scratching symbols on the top of each stone to identify it. People from other barracks mingled and talked with us after our evening meal. I overheard the young man asking someone to play chess, and being turned down.

"I would be very glad to play with you," I said, and introduced myself.

"Good," he said, giving me a hearty grin. "I am Otto. Come."

He had carved a rough board out of a corner of a wooden table. I accompanied him to his room in the Dutch barrack and tried not to stare at the chairs and other comforts. I knew how to play from my father's lessons, and from watching men in the park at home in Lódz.

Otto was a short, heavyset Dutchman about twenty-five years old, with inquiring eyes set in a round face. He always greeted me with a full-bellied laugh, as if he had just been told a terrific joke. His unfailing good humor comforted me. We spoke in German. Since Otto's German was better than mine, I learned from him every time we spoke. I was especially grateful to expand my German vocabulary. This helped me communicate with foremen on the job sites.

"I was in Rotterdam during the Blitzkrieg," Otto told me. "Without chess to

distract me, I think I would have gone mad from the bombing. We played by candlelight in the shelters."

"I have not heard of the Blitzkrieg," I replied.

"'Lightning Warfare'-that's the method the Germans used to break our defenses. They began on May 10, 1940. Simultaneously they bombed our airfields and cities and strafed our roads. Their tanks broke our infantry lines and disrupted communications. Then, with big cannons they poured across our borders. Our army was overwhelmed and quickly defeated. It was terrible. Bodies littered the streets. We could not even bury our dead. Bombs destroyed whole city blocks and our best airfields. All of my family was killed in one air raid. I survived by a fluke, buried in rubble. Friends died trying to dig me out. It took me two days to dig free of the wreckage. We were sure the British would rescue us, and they tried to help, but in five dreadful days it was over. France fell soon after."

I nodded. "Poland fell rapidly, too-in September 1939."

"And your family?"

"Gone." I avoided details that would reveal my heritage. Questions were safer. "How did you come to be here?"

"I was caught trying to contact the Dutch underground. If the Germans had not needed more workers, I suppose I would be dead now. I claimed I was looking for radishes-there were some in the cellar where they caught me. And the woman I was to meet was so convincing-she demanded they stop interfering, she wanted to sell her radishes! So they sent us to labor instead of to prison or the firing squad."

"So you are alive because of a few radishes."

He nodded. "A good actress and a good nose. I smelled the radishes before the Germans came. War is a strange business. Rook to knight four."

We played fairly regularly after that. We were evenly matched in skill, and the chess took our minds off other things.

"I am glad to have found you," Otto told me. "Not many here know chess."

Otto worked mixing concrete. "I spit into every batch," he confided. "And I water it down. I pissed into it once. Do you think I can sabotage the mix that way?" He grinned.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I know nothing about making concrete. It might."

"Check," he said, placing his rook where he could capture my king.

I moved my queen, taking his rook. "Checkmate."

"Oho! I did not see that coming. Well done, Miecio. I will have to talk less, and concentrate on my game more." He laughed.

It was good to hear the sound of laughter. I laughed with him. I could not remember the last time I had laughed. Otto seemed to enjoy our talks as much as the chess. He had a degree in sociology and he liked to expound on ideas. I liked to listen.

"I will tell you why the war is being fought," Otto said to me one day.

"Why?" I asked, curious to hear his explanation. Sociology was foreign to me, since my high school had been oriented toward technology.

"All wars," Otto said, "including the rise and aggression of Nazi Germany are about the quest for wealth and power, both by people and nations. We are here because

we are cheap labor. And why do they persecute Jews so ruthlessly, herding them into camps? So that they can steal their possessions. They grow rich on the spoils of persecution and war. Nazis educate their young to their biased beliefs, and fewer and fewer people question them. Why did the Nazis create the master race philosophy? To rationalize looting and enslaving other peoples. That's why ordinary Germans cooperate. They are getting more and more prosperous. And just wait. If they win, they will justify all they have done. The winner of a war rewrites the history books to make the victors the heroes."

"But there are idealists, too, who imagine a different world where human rights are respected. And there is equality among men in some places," I argued. "Idealists have worked tirelessly to make changes for the better in society." I thought of my father and smiled. A self-educated idealist, he was far from being limited by his childhood learning. "How does your theory cover them?"

"For a while idealists may succeed. They may even have well-meaning followers," Otto replied. "But eventually the thirst for profit takes over and distorts the original ideals, to favor the strong and powerful. The men who control raw materials and the means of production soon control governments, too. Look at the United States-a nation founded on principles of democracy and freedom. Yet slavery lasted about three hundred years there. It made men so rich they didn't want to give it up. And it still persists in men's attitudes and minds."

"And the Soviet Union?" I challenged Otto. "There each man is supposed to be equal."

"But really they have lost their freedoms, and are at the mercy of the ruling party. Thousands of opponents died under Stalin, so he could make the rest 'equal.' Actually, people high in the party live in comparative wealth, while others still struggle. And look at how they mercilessly brought Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia under their 'protection' early in the war. And when Finland refused them military bases, they battered the Finns into submission. They said these were acts of self-defense against Germany, but I don't believe it. The Soviets have as much desire to conquer as any greedy state."

I thought Otto made a good case. The Germans *did* seem to be swayed by Nazi propaganda.

"Do the Germans believe they are the master race, or are they just pretending so they can get control of everything, including wealth? What do you think?"

"They believe it, Miecio. They have been brainwashed by Nazi speeches and newspapers. Even adult minds can be controlled in this way. People are gullible. They believe what they are told. When they stand to gain so much, they will believe the most outrageous lies. And the children believe, too. Do you know what the Jesuits said about this?"

"No."

"'Give me a child up to the age of seven and his mind will be mine for life.'" They were right. It is hard for anyone to change attitudes learned during childhood. Look at how religious hatred persists, in spite of it being totally illogical. How often have you seen an adult change his or her religion because another one seemed better? Almost never. People are slaves to what they have been taught in their childhood. Only

brainwashing can control adult minds. Since 1933, in spite of their cultural achievements, the Germans have become the followers of a band of hooligans, because of overwhelming propaganda. They hope to dominate the world, now, and to reach that goal they fight with great enthusiasm and conviction."

"What you say makes a lot of sense. Still, it is hard to believe the Germans could be taken in by Hitler's speeches and Nazi slogans. They are just boasts and promises."

"The German people can't see clearly any more. And what they feel depends on what they see. Remember St. Paul said, 'We see through a glass darkly'?" I nodded, though of course I had no idea what this writer in the Christian Bible had really said. Otto went on. "Paul meant the mirror of a man's mind is dirty, and can't reflect reality clearly. Some people's mirrors are warped, too, like in a circus fun house. Have you seen these mirrors? You can hardly recognize your own face in such a mirror. Hitler warped the minds of the Germans with his misinformation, prejudices, and propaganda, so that now they hate Jews and others and think they are a superior race, entitled to dominate the world."

"That would explain the unbelievable changes in so many Germans and other people," I said. "I have found these things difficult to understand."

We played in silence for a while. "Is there no hope for the human race?" I asked Otto.

"Alas, no."

"You are a cynic, Otto. But I like you anyhow."

"I like you, too, Miecio, even though I suspect you are an idealist."

"How can you be so cheerful, with such a negative view of humanity?" I asked him.

"We little men can stay out of the way of the big fish, and still survive. Besides, why not smile? A frown will not make anything better, and it would make me and those around me more miserable." He shrugged. For a young man with such a carefree laugh, he thought very deeply about things. "Our most important task in life is to keep the mirrors of our minds clean and smooth. I have to work on mine every day." He grinned. "How's yours?"

"I'm sure mine could use a little cleaning," I said.

"This isn't an easy task," he admitted.

All my cares seemed to vanish during these fascinating discussions. Talking about psychology, sociology and philosophy was like visiting a foreign land. Even my father had not spoken in such depth about how people changed or perceived the world. I longed to share these thoughts with Szymek.

I realized that my mind was distorted about the German people. Any act of kindness surprised me, as if they were all criminals-a ridiculous notion. And I had become bitter and distrustful of my barrack mates. All my lofty nationalism had withered. I remembered how Father told me war brings madness. I began to wonder if I was a little mad myself.

CHAPTER 16 - Out of the Cold

Day after day the winter chill intensified. The soil froze solid. The work with picks and shovels to build earthworks over and around the new bunker became a struggle against the elements. On slim rations of bread, margarine, and a bowl of watery soup a day, all of us began to lose our strength. Some caught colds and influenza. Wladek became the nurse for the sick, as well as the translator. He treated the ill with a tenderness that moved my heart, and made me respect him even more.

Wladek asked the Commandant to let the weakest boys skip work. They suffered more from the thin rations than the grown men. The Commandant refused. All workers were needed on the job site, he was told. But he was given a little extra time away from his paperwork to help the sick.

In the forest we were under the supervision of German businessmen. The large German corporation *WASAG* oversaw the entire planning of the munitions site. Smaller German companies made agreements with *WASAG* to do various construction jobs. I was assigned to *Firma Stoye* of Leipzig, a major German city about fifty kilometers away. When the foreman called for a translator one day, a worker pointed me out. There was no use pretending ignorance. The foreman seemed glad to have someone to translate his orders.

"Why does the work go so slowly?" he asked me.

"Many of us have no warm clothes, and we are not fed enough to do such heavy work," I told him.

"Oh." He frowned. I could see he was not without sympathy, but to supply coats and food for eighty men was beyond his power. "Do what you can," he said. "When the wind blows hard, keep to the sheltered part of the building. Still, the work has to be finished." He shook his head and shrugged. "I will speak to the Commandant, but it may do no good."

If his request to the Commandant did any good, we never noticed it. I translated his suggestion, and we tried to keep out of the wind whenever possible. But I felt myself weaken day by day. I knew I would soon succumb to sickness, too.

One day as I spoke with the foreman he mentioned his firm was in need of painters. The machinery and pipes inside the munitions bunkers needed rust-proofing because sulfur fumes corroded the metal. I told him I'd done lots of painting before the war.

A week later I found myself on top of a ladder, a pail of paint in one hand and a brush in the other. Before me was a set of pipes attached to a wall. I stroked on the paint slowly and carefully, one centimeter at a time, as I had painted portraits before the war. The foreman who looked on to judge my painting ability called out, "Let me show you, Herr Wośko."

A middle-sized man with a pleasant face, he climbed the ladder, put the pail on a hook attached to the top of the ladder, and with one large stroke covered a meter of the pipe. "Can you do it like that?" he asked me.

"Of course I can." I did, and he nodded with a smile.

"Very good, Herr Wośko. Continue."

With a sudden sick feeling, I realized he could easily have sent me back outdoors to work, seeing that I had no idea how to do the job properly. But he didn't. He kept me on and showed me the proper way to paint as an act of kindness. I told myself sternly to remember this moment, that not all Germans had become monsters, despite of Hitler's influence. But I did not dare think of what he might have done if he had suspected I was a Jew.

So far, such suspicions seemed confined to my barrack. No matter what fear or weakness I felt, I made sure that I always carried a self-assured, smiling face, radiating an air of confidence and strength. I cursed the cold and the food as often as my barrack-mates. This, and my friendship with Wladek, made me one of the group.

The fumes inside the bunker were oppressive. My eyes burned sometimes. I got blinding headaches from breathing in the tainted air all day, too. But I was out of the cruel cold and the work was much easier. I began to gain strength.

I painted with Italian workers, who entertained themselves by singing passages from operas and other songs as they worked. Szymek would have liked these men. They were kind and jovial, with strong, melodious voices. Their singing helped me continue when my arms and back ached from fatigue. I realized that surviving in a camp like this required more than sufficient food and clothing. It was also important to hope and to remember the joys of life, despite the hardship. I did not speak Italian, but I smiled and gestured my thanks to the singing men, and they welcomed me warmly into their group.

"What are you singing?" I asked one of them. He did not understand me.

"*Parlez-vous français?*" he asked. I shook my head. Then I asked my question in

German, and one of them answered me.

"*Verdi,*" he explained. "A tragic story, but so beautiful, no? And about love, always!"

I managed to pick up some Italian words and phrases, so I could speak with them in a simple way. What I could not express in words, I did with my hands.

The Italians, being just below the Germans in standing and prestige in the camp, were getting more than enough food from their own canteen to satisfy their basic needs. With gestures they asked me why I was so thin. I explained we Poles were fed very little. The next day they filled my pockets with bread. Gratefully, I gave them my cigarette rations in return. I didn't smoke, so I didn't need them, but almost all the other workers did. The Italians were happy with the trade, and continued to smuggle bread to me. I ate some of the bread, and shared some with the others too.

"You are working with Italians? Ask them about their warm country," Wladek said.

I did. The men were happy to tell me of the beauties of their homeland, with its beautiful beaches and charming vineyards.

It seemed strange to work with the Italians. Their leader, Mussolini, had made them allies with the Germans-hence their high standing in the camp. Mussolini had ambitions similar to Hitler's. But most of the Italian people did not seem very dedicated to the war. They did not speak of dominating the world. They did not insult me or my country. They sang songs of love; they spoke of good wine and beautiful women. If I judged all Italians by these workers, they were a warm and genial people, not at all

warlike. The political tangles of the war were beyond my understanding. I knew only that the vast conflict dragged on, devouring more and more of the world.

CHAPTER 17 - A Man Talking with a Man

I avoided mixing with my barrack-mates as much as possible-there was too much danger of them catching me in another slip, and accusing me of being a Jew-with the exception of Wladek. He and I often drifted into discussions in the evenings after chores were done. He never voiced any suspicion, but I was certain he knew my secret.

"Look around you, Miecio," he said to me one day. "Look beyond the barracks and the Germans. Notice the forest and the constantly changing sky; at night look out your window at the stars. God's greatness is reflected in the countless wondrous species of trees, bushes, plants, the breathtaking stars, each one different-in everything. Even when the snow falls and we are cold, I know that every single snowflake is unique, its pattern beautiful. To see God's creation is to be immersed in miracles. All is astonishing and awesome. No matter what we experience in the war, we must never forget the miracle of life and the splendor of creation. I see God everywhere." His eyes shone. I saw the deep well of faith which sustained this strong man in the face of suffering and want. And yet he also sounded a bit like our science teachers in school. His was a faith I could easily respect. When speaking with him I did not feel like a Jew talking with a Catholic; I felt like a man talking with a man.

"I have heard scientists say all things were made by chance," I said, for the sake of debate. "Such men say God had nothing to do with creation."

We were sitting on some rocks out of earshot of our barrack, but within sight of it. Wladek nodded. "Yes. There are such scientists. But I pity them. Do they stand in awe

and joy as they look at creation? I think they miss something." He caught my eye. "No man can say how God made all these things. That is beyond our understanding. There is no point trying to explain creation and beauty, they can only be experienced."

"How can you see so much beauty when your belly rumbles with hunger and you are cold?" I asked him. "And when people do horrible things to each other?"

"How can I stop seeing what is right in front of my eyes, no matter what people do to me or to each other? If I can stop an unjust thing from happening, I must do so. If I cannot, I must endure," he replied, "if a discouraging thought enters my mind."

I smiled. "Do you ever have discouraging thoughts?" I asked, liking him better each moment. "You are so strong and sure of yourself."

At that moment snow began to fall. There was no wind, for a change. The snow drifted down gently out of a gray sky. Wladek shrugged. "I have always tried to think things through. That helps me now. But still I am a human being. Sometimes thoughts or feelings come which don't help me very much. At those moments I focus on something clean and natural, like the sky or a tree, or a snowflake." He lifted his face so the snow fell on his upturned eyelids. "And I remember God's greatness, so much bigger than this war. This war, and all the things we hate about it, will pass, but the wondrous things God has made will endure."

"You do sound like a teacher," I said. My trust in him had grown strong. I dared ask another question. "But will the people we love be alive to enjoy all this beauty?" I thought of my parents and Szymek.

Wladek's eyes filled with sympathy. "Those who lose their loved ones need to

remember God and the beauties of creation most of all. No matter how great the sorrow, life is greater than our losses. God will help us endure and find new joys, no matter what our faith."

This was as close as Wladek came to saying he knew my secret during the war. His words brought tears to my eyes. I could imagine my father saying such things. I could not speak for a time, and we sat side by side, watching the snowflakes gently fall to the ground. I caught some on my sleeve, and saw their six-pointed shapes, an instant before they melted. They were beautiful, as Wladek had said. Are my parents alive to see this snow? I asked myself. Did Szymek watch it too, in Lódz?

At that moment several of our barrack-mates came out and joined us on the rocks. They looked at me with distrust. "Wladek, one of the sick boys is calling for you," one of them said. Wladek put his hand on my shoulder as he stood up. I felt a quick squeeze as he left us.

"What were you talking about?" the boys asked me, when Wladek had gone, their eyes narrow with suspicion.

"The war," I said, "There is no news to be had. I am tired now. I must rest. Good night to you." I went to my bunk to lie down.

They could soon trip me up in any conversation. Already they whispered about me because I did not go to Mass on Sundays. "I may miss Mass," I had told them, "But I never miss on Easter Sunday." I had heard some other camp-mates use this excuse.

On Sundays the men and women of the Russian camp were allowed to mix with the workers in the main camp. One of the Russian boys had a violin. We were all

attracted to his music. To hear something so fresh and lovely in the harsh camp was a welcome distraction.

"Thank you for your music," I said to him one day in Polish. The Russian and Polish languages have many common elements. Both have their roots in the Slavic language. I twisted my Polish to sound like Russian, and he understood me.

"The music is not much," he said modestly. A shy smile lit his pleasant face, and he pushed his unruly blond hair out of his eyes. He was a fragile-looking lad, with gentle ways.

"It is a great deal, I think," I disagreed. "Everyone feels better because you bring your music here."

"You are very kind to say so."

"I am Miecio from Urzedow in Poland," I said to him. "Where are you from?"

"I am Ivan, from Smolensk in Belarus," he replied. "There the Germans captured me and many other young men and women-we did not retreat with the Soviet Army. The Germans brought us here to work for them. I am glad to be-how do you say?"

"Alive?"

He nodded.

"Perhaps you could teach me to play the violin a little, and some of your language, too?" I asked.

Ivan's face lit up. "I would enjoy that very much. You are the first to ask me!" He stroked his old, battered violin with affection. "Are you so much interested?"

"Very much," I said.

We met nearly every Sunday after that. I looked forward to our meetings. I improved my Russian. We talked for hours. Ivan was always ready to share his views on life with me. I let him talk.

Ivan's favorite points of discussion were, as I remember his words: "We all seek pleasure-that is the right word?-more than anything. We all want to have a good time, yes? We go to school to get a good job. We want a good job to get a pretty woman. We want pleasant friends and a job that is pleasant, too. So why not just go after pleasure without wasting time? Otherwise on your deathbed you will cry and ask 'What was it all about?'"

"But when you are after pleasure," I said, "you could step on someone. Then how can you enjoy yourself, when you see others suffering? Maybe it can be a pleasure to help others. You do that with your music."

"Ah, but I play most of all for my own joy."

"What if your pleasures make other people envy you? Maybe no one will want to be your friend. Or do you think you could enjoy things all alone?"

Ivan smiled and stopped me. "Wait, your arguments are too quick for me. What do I want to say? Yes. You fool yourself if you think you care most about being good or doing good. Be more honest, Miecio. At the bottom of your soul, you are after pleasure, too."

His wry smile took the sting from his words. We had become friends. "So what pleasure do you want most right now?" I teased him.

"To be out of this cold camp, of course. I would go to a warm country!"

I told him about my Italian friends and their country, though I could not do it justice.

"Maybe we will go to Italy after the war," he said with a smile.

The cold was a problem for all of us. The Russian prisoners didn't eat enough or wear enough to keep them warm either. As a painter I escaped the cold most of the time. I still got headaches from the sulfurous fumes, but working indoors was a blessing, compared to working with a pick and shovel outside in the freezing weather. Ivan's job was to bury the wires carrying electricity from one bunker to another, to protect them from the weather. I was sorry to see him suffer.

One day a delicate lad in my barracks became ill. His name was Tom and his bunk was near to mine. He grabbed my hand as I passed that morning. "I am too weak to work today, Miecio," he said. "Will you ask Wladek to help me?"

"Of course, Tom. You will get well soon." His hand burned with fever, and I feared for him.

Wladek and I carefully moved Tom to an empty bunk in the room reserved for the sick. "You are kind," Tom said, looking up at me. "If I die, I would like you to have my blanket."

My throat ached suddenly. "You won't die. You will get better. I will bring you some soup tonight myself. Stop thinking like that! Just rest and sleep."

Tom smiled at me. He was a sweet boy, far too weak for the hard work on the bunkers.

Wladek put his hand on my shoulder. "Tom is right to trust you." The other boys

were just filing out to breakfast. They hurried past the sick room, afraid of catching a fever. "You know the true meaning of religion, Miecio," Wladek said to me. "It is helping others, living in harmony with others. God would be pleased if other boys helped with the sick, too." He looked at them. When they had gone, Wladek walked with me to the end of the line. "I am glad you are working indoors now, Miecio. Do you think you could get Tom and a few others jobs painting inside?"

"I will try," I promised him. "But the sulfur fumes are very bad. Those with a cough might not be able to breathe."

"When they are better, then."

"I'll see if anyone can spare something to help them," I added, then handed Wladek my own blanket to help warm Tom until he recovered.

Wladek smiled. "I knew I could rely on you."

I wanted to earn the respect of this strong, fair-minded man. My friendship with Wladek bolstered my standing in the barracks, too. But how long could it protect me from the suspicions of my barrack-mates?

I spoke with the foreman, and he said he could find places for two more men in a few weeks. When I brought Tom his soup that night I gave him the good news. "Only hold on, and you will be working inside a bunker soon."

Tom was too weak to feed himself, so I spooned the hot soup gently into his mouth. In spite of the cold, he sweated with fever. I went back to the canteen with Wladek to get extra water for him. Each time I tried to leave Tom, he clung to me, murmuring for his mother. Pity kept me at his bedside. I was angry, too. Why should the

war take this boy from the parents he still needed, when he had done nothing to deserve this fate? Through that night I stayed with Tom, spooning water into his mouth whenever he was able to take it. Wladek did the same for another sick boy. We were both exhausted the next day, but Wladek smiled at me as he felt Tom's head.

"Feel this!" he said. "The fever has broken. I believe Tom will recover. Your care brought him through the crisis."

CHAPTER 18 - I Know Who You Are!

One night as I drifted toward a deep sleep, just before my senses failed entirely, I became aware of movement around me. Four of my roommates hovered over me. One of them pulled back my blanket. I knew instantly that they wanted to see my penis-to expose me as a circumcised Jew. My exhaustion was almost the end of me. It was already too late to cover myself, I could think of only one thing to do. In as loud a voice as I could muster I shouted, "You fucking son of a bitch, you want to see it-here it is."

With that I lifted my pelvis into the boy's face, ruining his chance to get a good look at my genitals. Startled by my bold response, the four gave up, jumped down and returned to their own bunks.

My response had saved me, but I feared they might try it again. I slept on my stomach after that. From that night on, my sleep became shallow, and I started each day ragged with fatigue. A part of me was always on the alert. I never relaxed.

I talked with Wladek sometimes about intolerance. "Religion," he said, "is supposed to make people more tolerant and loving toward one another, but instead it often does the opposite."

"Yes. Religion often divides people. It breeds prejudice, persecutions and even mass murders!" I tried to keep bitterness out of my voice, to keep the discussion carefully on the philosophical level. But I was angry with the boys who took bread from my hands, and then tried to betray me. Why had I worried about their welfare? Because they were fellow Poles? My country had given up my people, turning a blind eye to terrible

persecutions and slaughter. Once I would have helped any Pole, risking anything, including my life. Now I felt resentment. These boys were no longer my countrymen. They were a threat. I was surrounded by enemies on all sides. I did not want to speak of my fellow Jews, though, even to Wladek. Instead I said, "Look at what is happening in Europe now!"

Wladek nodded. "Sadly, my friend, you are right. History has already shown us this pattern. The Crusades, the Inquisition and religious wars put to death many innocents, and now the Jews suffer, whereas the Church should protect all Poles, regardless of their beliefs. We are all still Poles!"

One of the boys overheard. "Why should the Church protect the Christ killers?"

"You know nothing! Jesus himself was a Jew, and most of the early Christians were Jewish too. It was the Romans who killed Jesus, together with thousands they crucified every year. They feared Jesus would lead an armed rebellion. When you honor Christ, you should also honor the religion which gave birth to Christianity."

In the face of Wladek's scorn, the boys fell silent. But I could tell they were unconvinced. Later I heard Tom arguing with some of the boys in my room. "I tell you, Miecio is no Jew. I heard him pray over me when I was sick, while all of you were too afraid to enter the sick room! I am alive because of him. He is a good Catholic, and my friend!"

Though I could never let down my guard, I was glad to have made two friends in my barrack.

A few months after our arrival, a boy of our barrack rushed in saying, "Miecio,

Miecio, a new transport from Poland has arrived. I met a man from Urzedow. He wants to meet you!"

A hand seemed to close around my heart. Faking joy and anticipation, I went to see him. To do otherwise would have given away my false identity at once. But my heart was pounding in my chest. Perhaps I would be unmasked by this newcomer.

"Miecio Wośko," I introduced myself. "I am happy to see a countryman from my town!"

"Richard Kowal," he said in response.

Tall, dark haired and dark eyed, Richard had a short moustache under a large nose. His looks could have been mistaken for a Jew. He looked me over from top to bottom, gave me an empty smile and said he didn't remember seeing me in Urzedow. Then he left. I sat down, and focused on hiding my fear of discovery. It took all of my strength to avoid shaking like a leaf. A few weeks later Richard came to my barrack.

"Miecio, come outside and talk with me." Something about his smile seemed false.

As soon as we were away from the others he dropped the smile. "I wrote to my uncle in Urzedow. The real Wośko is still there. I know who you are. You are a Jew. If you will give me your bread, margarine and cigarettes I will not tell anyone."

It was suddenly hard to breathe. After all my bravado and care, I had been found out. There was no use denying it. Richard smirked at me, knowing his power over me. I would starve if I gave him my bread and margarine. I had read about blackmail before the war. In fiction, the hero was always tough with a blackmailer. Otherwise the blackmailer

never stopped increasing his demands. So far, my reading had stood me in good stead. I decided to rely on it one more time.

I took a menacing step toward Richard. "Go and tell the Germans. I will escape and come back to Urzedow after the war is over and kill you. If I give you all my food, I will die and you would have nothing. So why not be friends, and I will give you my cigarettes. This is a lot! Even though I don't smoke, I can trade cigarettes for food."

Richard's eyes narrowed as he tried to decide if I was tough enough to carry out my threat. Luckily I had regained most of my strength while painting. Richard was taller than me, but I was solidly built and looked strong. I don't think I breathed while he hesitated.

"All right," he said grudgingly. I handed over my ration of cigarettes, though I had been planning to give them to the Italians in return for more bread.

Richard kept my secret for the present. But how long would this satisfy him? At any moment he could turn me in if he thought he saw more profit in it.

I slept poorly that night and the next. My Italian friends asked me about my long face. "It is nothing," I lied, summoning a bright smile. "Only I have to trade my cigarettes to someone else for soup. I have none for you."

One of the men, Mario, clapped me on the shoulder. "You are a good man. For you and your sick friends, we will give bread for free. We should stop smoking anyhow, no?" He laughed with his friends, and they all agreed. A tear leaked from one of my eyes, I was so moved. "Hey, it is nothing, my friend!" Mario insisted. "In our canteen, there is plenty of bread. We want more pasta!"

That day taught me that there were still good people in the world, even among my enemies. I resolved not to give in to despair. While I lived and Richard kept my secret, there was still hope.

"You are a good man also, Mario," I said. "Come. Let us sing again. I have almost learned the words." Like Ivan's violin playing, their songs helped me forget my fears and my very real danger of discovery, for a while.

I redoubled my efforts to appear at all times strong and full of confidence. My cheeks ached from my false smiles. At night every small sound startled me into full wakefulness. Tensely, I waited for the hardest of the boys to move against me. How would they attack me next? Would I be able to fool them again? I had no way of knowing. You are living on borrowed time, now, I told myself.

CHAPTER 19 - Temptations

The winter was nearing its end and I continued to work side by side with the Italians, painting walls, pipes and machinery.

"Hey, Miecio! You begin to look more like a boy and less like a scarecrow!" They greeted me one morning. "This is good!"

Mario especially seemed to take pride in the effects of the bread they brought me. He cuffed my shoulder affectionately. "This is more like it! A boy like you is not meant to be so thin, no? Eat! Eat more!" Once he brought me a sweet bun instead of plain bread, and beamed with pride as I ate it with obvious pleasure. "Yes, that is it! Enjoy the good things in life, even here!"

One day I happened to mention my prewar technical education to Bruno, my German foreman.

"You know drafting and mathematics?" he asked, suddenly very interested.

"Yes, I like doing them," I replied.

Bruno smiled at me and complimented me again on my good work as a painter.

"I could tell that first day that you would be a good worker. You just needed a little instruction."

A week later, Bruno told me he had reported my technical background to the chief foreman, Herr Muller. The next day I was called to see Herr Muller at his office in a small, ground level, wooden cabin in the forest, at a safe distance from the bunkers. A cheerful fire burned in the fireplace, heating the entire cabin. Small gratings above each

door allowed heat into all the rooms. I felt my fingers and toes tingle as they warmed. I was surprised to find that Muller had a secretary, a young German girl. She occupied the first room as I entered the building. I must have gaped at the sight of the pretty, shapely girl. I had grown from a boy of fifteen at the beginning of the war into a young man of nineteen, seldom contacting pretty girls. I had carefully avoided the Polish girls in the camp, for fear of giving myself away. So I had not been alone with a lovely girl for a very long time. I think I stammered as I asked for Herr Muller. The girl revealed no emotion as she showed me into Herr Muller's office, through one of the three doors off her own.

"Herr Wośko, come in! Herr Bruno has been telling me good things about you. And now it seems you may be able to do some drafting." Muller was affable, and offered me a chair. "This war!" he said. "Bah! All of the skilled professional men are fighting at the front. A waste! Does Herr Hitler think we businessmen can do without all of them, and still produce good work? Every day I struggle to find enough good workmen, and does anyone commend me? No! I am expected to conjure good men out of the air, I suppose! *Firma Stoye* has not enough draftsmen now."

He handed me an architectural drawing showing the foundation and the first storey of a factory. "Do you think you could copy this for us? And show the dimensions more clearly? And then calculate the volume of concrete we would need to pour the foundations, and the volume of blocks needed for the walls?"

"I will do my best, Herr Muller," I said with an answering smile.

"Good. Very good." He got to his feet and opened the door. "Fraulein Dichter, is the back office clean? Of course it is. You are a good girl. Come, Herr Wośko." He

showed me a small office behind the secretary's room. "You can work here, Herr Wośko." Pencils, ruler and paper were neatly arranged on the drafting board. I nodded. "Take your time. It is more important to get the figures right than to rush the job, yes? That other door leads to a washroom, if you need one."

I took pains to make the drawing accurate, and managed to produce one neater and better labeled than the original. The hardest part for me was working out the spelling of German terms from the scribbled original. Until then I had heard most of them only in conversation. Then I filled in some missing measurements, calculating them from the ones on the drawing, and calculated the volume figures he wanted. I checked my work twice to make sure I had not slipped up, then took it to Muller.

"But this is very good, Herr Wośko! Better than I expected. You have been hiding this talent all this time? From now on, you will work here."

I knew I would miss the companionship of the Italians, but it would be a great relief to get away from the sulfur fumes. I would also have to make other arrangements to barter for extra food, but I knew a rare opportunity when I saw one. The work would be easy, even pleasant by comparison. I would have little contact with others, during which to betray myself with a careless word or gesture.

"I will be glad to work here," I told Muller, in my far from perfect German.

He shook my hand. Receiving respect and even praise from a German felt strange. Bruno had also been exceptionally kind. I was grateful that these fair-minded men were in charge of my work detail.

So I began to report for work in the office of the chief foreman of my labor group.

This gave me new status with some of the boys, and seemed to cause resentment in some others. In the morning, on arrival, I said to the young secretary, "*Guten Morgen, Fraulein Dichter,*"-"Good Morning" and in the afternoon on leaving, "*Guten Abend, Fraulein Dichter,*"-"Good Evening."

The young woman did not attract my affection, but sometimes her well-shaped figure appeared in my dreams. Her breasts were well-developed, larger than average, and her hips narrowed to a slender waist. She was the very shape of adolescent fantasies. I wanted to stop and enjoy her company at work. But any further conversation with her could be hazardous. It might attract unwanted attention. I could ill afford extra scrutiny.

Haunted by my desires, I would feign indifference as I passed through her office. For eight hours a day, six days a week, an attractive sixteen-year-old girl worked just on the other side of a thin door from me. We were usually alone in the cabin. Sometimes this seemed like a horrible new punishment. A few steps away was a blossoming woman, calling out to the man blossoming within me. If I raised my voice and called, she would step into my private office. I longed to engage her in conversation, to make her smile at me. A few words wouldn't hurt, my desires taunted me. Go on. Speak to her. She has to be as lonely as you are! Otherwise why did she sometimes seem interested in me?

From time to time she would ask "*Wie geht's Herr Wośko?*"-"How are you?" And once in a while, "*Möchten Sie Kaffee?*"-"Do you want some coffee?" At war with my teenaged longings, I always thanked Fraulein Dichter, declining. In spite of my fantasies and dreams, I managed to remain aloof and polite. I knew she was as dangerous as she was pretty. She was a loyal German, who might see me as a Jew all too easily. Why was

she carefully friendly? Perhaps she missed seeing boys her age. They were all fighting on the front lines.

Herr Muller checked briefly on my progress about once a day, but for the greater part I was left alone. Muller went by bicycle to inspect other construction sites, so he was out of the office most of the time. I redrew plans for factories, showing clearly the dimensions needed to calculate the amount of materials needed for construction. Sternly, I made myself focus on my work, not Fraulein Dichter. If my work suffered, I could lose this job. I forced my mind back to my task again and again. I double-checked all my calculations. My plans were used to estimate costs for materials. I became better with practice, and sometimes found the need for additional amounts of concrete or paint, which meant more money for *Firma Stoye*.

"Excellent!" Herr Muller would say. "I might have ordered too little, and had to pay for the extra out of my company's profits."

An architect from Leipzig named Herr Bauerhafer visited us from time to time. He was pleased with my work, too. Without me, they would have had to do the tedious drawings themselves. Once in a while Herr Muller took me to the sites of buildings already constructed, to verify the dimensions for final invoicing to WASAG.

I never rushed. I took my time. There was no need to work too hard for Nazi Germany. Nevertheless, I managed to complete the drawings efficiently. So I had spare time in the office and I began to think about how to use it.

CHAPTER 20 - News from Urzedow

Every week I met Richard to hand over my cigarettes. He was a blackmailer through and through. I should have been grateful. If he had been less greedy he would have turned me in right away. He asked for my margarine again, but I refused.

"With one word I could take away your cushy new job, and have you shot."

"Try that, and I'll escape. I'll come back after the war, hunt you down like an animal, and kill you." I used my most menacing voice.

Gradually his extra demands subsided, and he became resigned to getting my cigarettes. As time passed he began to treat me differently. Maybe he was impressed by my prestigious office job. Instead of being cold and abrupt, he became talkative. I knew he had left Urzedow three months after I had. One day, as he grinned, pocketing my cigarettes, I asked the question that had burned inside me ever since he arrived.

"Richard, you were in Urzedow when the Jews were taken away on that October 15th. Please tell me what happened after that."

"Sure," he said, swaggering a little. "I'll tell you."

"Let's find a quiet spot where no one can overhear us."

We huddled in the shelter of some trees. No one paid us any attention. Richard seemed eager to show off his knowledge.

"On October 14th the Jews were ordered to pack a small bundle of essential items, and leave everything else behind. They were going to be moved to the ghetto in Krasnik or the camp in Krasnik Fabryczny by nine o'clock the next morning. All night we heard

them wailing and weeping as they packed the few items they could take with them."

He grinned, seeming to feel only glee as he told of sorrows.

"In the morning, all the Jews were gone. The Germans checked their shitty houses to make sure nobody stayed behind. In one house an elderly couple was still there."

I bit my lip, trying not to show emotion. There were no other elderly Jewish couples living in the Jewish area on the market in Urzedow—only my parents. He must be talking about Father and Mother. I could not guess why they had remained behind.

"The Germans got them and asked Kazur, the janitor who swept the market square, to get a shovel and come along. They all got into a horse-driven cart and went to the Jewish cemetery. The Germans asked the couple to undress. 'Oh please don't kill us,' said the old Jewess, but the Germans shot them anyway. The useless old couple fell to the ground. The soldiers left. Kazur took the clothing and buried their bodies. Later he said it was simple work. They did not weigh much."

My whole chest seemed to crumple. I could not be absolutely sure, but that couple was probably my parents. They were not really elderly, but to the young Kazur, their prematurely aged appearance must have seemed very old. I held on to my self-control with difficulty. I would not show my grief to this heartless blackmailer.

How many times had I imagined their fates? How many times had I held my memory of them close in my heart at night, and asked God for them to survive by some miracle, to find some kindness, some dignity in the midst of this nightmare? Never had I allowed myself to imagine such a humiliating and cruel end to their lives. I felt as if I would collapse from the weight of my grief, but I steeled myself to hear the rest.

Richard relished telling his story. He gave me an eager smile and went on. "I saw some shootings myself," he boasted, "and I was told of many others. A few of the Jews did not follow the crowds to the ghetto or the camp. Some sons-of-bitches had enough money to pay farmers in the area to hide them. Very few could stay that way for long, though, because Poles could be shot for hiding a Jew. Do you remember Itka, the owner of the grocery store at the corner of Wodna Street? A farmer was hiding her, but one morning a few weeks later she was found dead. Someone killed her and took her money. That happened just a week before I left Urzedow."

I did remember her. Even in the hardest times, she gave small sweets to hungry children; she tried to bring cheer to the frightening days. Itka's heart had been as big as the harvest sky. Her money had been saved penny by penny over many years of hard work. She never cheated anyone or raised her prices, even when shortages pinched us all. I wondered whether Itka had given Richard free candy when he was a little boy. Probably.

"Some Jews without much money hid in the forest. At night they crept out to buy potatoes and bread from the farmers. The Polish partisans shot some of them. Nobody knows why."

The partisans I had hoped to join-our fellow Poles, fighting against the Nazi oppressors-even they had killed Jews. What a fool I had been, those days on the run, hoping to find allies among the partisans! Sneaking into and out of the forest, thinking it was a safe shelter. Really, I had been flirting with death.

Richard could not seem to stop talking.

"Lejzor's wife hid in a garden in the suburbs with her two sons. The Germans

found her and brought them to the Jewish cemetery. They shot the boys in front of her, before shooting her. Someone said she knelt in the dirt and begged mercy for her sons, but of course the Germans did not listen. They didn't always bother to take the Jews to the cemetery. One day the Germans captured five Jews in the hills, just before the forest, and killed them on the spot. No one buried them. I guess the wolves and foxes had a good meal off them."

I wanted to reach across and stop Richard's mouth. I wanted to end this flow of hideous pictures, and his obvious pleasure in telling it. But he had warmed to his subject, and hardly took a breath between sentences. I could not even interrupt to ask more about my parents and the others.

"One morning at dawn," he went on, "I was getting ready with my brother to cut wood. Suddenly we heard distant shots. We ran out to see what had happened. On the horizon near the hills we saw two Germans. When we got closer we saw some dead Jews on the ground. Food was spilled all around the bodies. They had been returning to the forest with provisions bought in the village during the night. Someone had told the Germans where they were hiding. The soldiers had come before dawn and waited for them."

I made some gesture to convey I had heard enough. But with a half-smile Richard stopped me. "No, no. I want to tell you this! One day I was passing the Town Hall. You remember the police station, part of the Town Hall. Well, I saw a young Jew going into the station-just walking in there, of his own accord! I was so surprised. He looked sick, and he could hardly walk. Later a friend told me he had come in to be killed! Can you

believe it? He walked right up to the officer on duty and said, 'I cannot take it any more. It is not my fault I was born a Jew. I am not any different from all of you.' Of course, they laughed in his face and locked him in the cellar. That afternoon Kazur and two Germans took him on a cart to the cemetery. He did not even cry out or weep. He just got down from the cart and waited for the bullets!"

I could believe it. Starvation, cold and illness might have been endurable if the young man had possessed any friends, any family to turn to. In the hollow of my aching chest, I felt a stab of loneliness. Yes, I could believe it. Richard did not wait for me to answer. Like a panzer division he moved forward, telling more and more stories.

"But that was nothing," he continued. "Some farmers really hated Jewish slime! Near the village of Ostrow a Jew went to a farmhouse begging for food. Three farmers tied him up. He pleaded for his life. They treated him like a cow to be slaughtered, then handed him over to the German command post in Popkowice. He was shot right away, and the farmers were rewarded for their trouble. Each of them got one kilogram of sugar!"

Finally Richard paused long enough for me to speak. "Do you know what happened to the Jews who were taken away with the transport from Urzedow, that October morning?"

"Of course I know," Richard bragged. "Word of their fate spread through all the villages. Most of the young Jews were sent to the labor camp Krasnik, an industrial factory, to work. Those who were not fit enough for hard work were sent to the new ghetto in the town of Krasnik. In *Krasnik Fabryczny* there were already about five

thousand Jews from Austria and the surrounding towns and villages. The work was backbreaking. There was very little food. Conditions were terrible." Richard grinned. "Sometimes villagers saw the prisoners marching in columns to work. They were forced to sing praises to Hitler for teaching them how to work hard. Once in a while a shitty Jew got a potato or some bread from a farmer watching the column pass, in exchange for a coin he'd managed to hide. One farmer who did that was caught and locked up in the camp with the Jewish crap. Other things like that happened. Late in December, near Christmas time, the Germans selected a hundred Jews who were sick or weakened by the work and shot them. Many of the older men and women were herded into the ghetto in Krasnik, to await execution. About fifty of them were shot every few days. It's hard work getting rid of so much garbage, you know."

Words finally burst out of me. "Weren't you sorry to see so many innocent people murdered without mercy?"

I wanted to pin Richard to the ground with this question, to see him squirm. But although he was surprised, he was unabashed. "This is the fate the Jews deserve. They killed our God Jesus. It had to be this way. It's our God's revenge."

"I have to go now," I said, sickness rising in my throat.

"But I have more to tell you."

"Save it for next time."

Now I knew that my parents must have perished in the Krasnik ghetto, if they were not the couple shot in the Kierkut on the morning of October 15. I needed to be alone. I went deeper into the trees, where no one could see me. Tears burst from me in a

flood. I gasped for breath and tried to control my sobs. I had been away from the barrack for some time. It was Sunday, our day off, but someone might begin to miss me and wonder what I was doing. I managed to compose myself, and then broke down again. I saw my parents' kind faces, and all the good people I had known in Urzedow. They had been shot like animals! Not a single one of them had done a thing to deserve such a cruel fate. I could not master my tears. "Father, why did you make me promise to live?" I whispered. "It is too painful to be one of the last." I could not even imagine my gentle father's reply.

Many years later I learned that of the five hundred Jews living in Urzedow, only four survived the war. I was probably the fifth. Farmer Wurman managed to hide the four in his basement. His farm was in the wooded part of the hills, so it was easier to hide there. Two other farmers tried to hide Jews, but they were denounced by their neighbors, and executed. No Jews live in Urzedow today.

CHAPTER 21 - Choosing Life

Richard's accounts of executions shocked me so much that my act began to fall apart. I could not hide my grief. And his callous words made a mockery of all I had done to keep up my spirits. All philosophy, all attitudes paled beside the terrible reality of his tales. Outside this small island with its semblance of safety, my fellow Jews were being mass murdered.

My thoughts turned to Lódz . My heart cried out to Szymek. "God grant you are still safe, my friend! Please keep safe! Without your friendship, how will I go on?" I could write no letter to my dearest friend, no diary of my tortured thoughts, for documents could be discovered and used against me. No one in the camp spoke of Lódz. Dreadful imaginings rose in my mind. If the Germans could kill or torture the five hundred Jews of Urzedow, what would they do to the thousands in Lódz? Trapped in the ghetto, how could my people fight their oppressors? Who was left alive? As the war dragged on, what hope did they have for deliverance?

My customary brave front crumbled. I could summon no smiles to my face. Pain lodged in my chest like an arrow that could not be removed. Anger and bitterness followed. I wanted to scream at the German foremen. I wanted to shriek at the silent sky. My friends saw the change in me first. I knew I had to do better, or I would be revealed as a Jew in hiding. I had to get hold of myself, or I would follow my parents to the grave. But how?

Richard's stark words replayed in my mind over and over. What could I do to anchor myself to life, when so much death echoed in my head? My masquerade had become its own kind of prison. I was a puppet with a pale painted face, going through the motions of life, but dead inside. Soon the Germans would notice and begin to ask questions.

Every night I swallowed bitter sobs, knowing I dared not make a sound to attract my barrack-mates' attention. I tried to remember what Father had told me. "Don't let the madness into you, or you will be truly lost." I felt lost already, adrift in a sea of the spilled blood of innocents. I became even more of a loner to hide my inner struggle. Ivan asked for me, and I made an excuse to put him off. Otto spoke to Wladek, wondering why I played no more chess.

Wladek took me aside. "You must be brave," he told me. "Whatever sadness or anger you feel, you must not let your enemies see it. Be as you were before. That way you have a greater chance of safety. All wounds heal with time, but you must buy time by being brave now."

It frightened me that he saw so much, without my telling him a single word.

One night, I dreamed of the book Father had shown me before Poland was invaded—Plato's Discourses. I awoke with the feel of it in my hands. In my dream I had grabbed hold of the side of my bunk and made it into the book. I remembered the texture of its covers-a little rough from repeated use, but solid, firm. "Knowledge survives wars," I said to myself. "With knowledge I have a better chance of survival." I had already

sought out new skills-tinkering with the violin, learning Russian. My ability to paint had kept me sheltered inside a bunker, away from the brutal winter weather. My knowledge of drafting had brought me a job where I could hide safely away from prying eyes all day. Father had always taught me to study hard. His respect for learning lived on in me. He had been right to value education and knowledge. I swallowed the lump in my throat.

All foreign workers received small wages twice a month in Reich marks-German money. On Sundays we were allowed to leave the camp and go to the nearest town to spend them, as long as we got back before dark. Only thirty minutes away by foot, the small town proved to have very little of use on the store shelves. Food and clothing were rationed, and we could not buy either. The boys in the barrack used to say the money would do them more good if burned in a warming fire. I had found a bookstore, though, and my knowledge of German enabled me to buy books and read them. I had bought a few scientific books written for the layman. These I read in the evenings, and loaned to Wladek. We had a source of recreation, of new thoughts, not available to the others. (Of course, the store carried no books written in Polish.) Sometimes Wladek and I discussed topics from the books-astronomy or biology. My last trip I had found nothing of interest. However, the owner gave me a publisher's catalogue to look over.

"I can order books for you, Herr Wośko-whatever you choose from this catalogue," he told me, eager for more sales.

I came across a course of study of the English language in the catalogue. Called *Die Langesheidtsche Methode der Englisher Sprache*, the course was based on self-instruction. It intrigued me. But would it be too dangerous to order it, to possess it? I had

perfect conditions for study-a quiet room to myself, away from everyone. And I would be happy to steal some hours from Nazi Germany. But what would happen if Herr Muller came across my secret studies? Surely I would be interrogated? That would put me in grave danger of being uncovered as a Jew, or perhaps suspected of being a spy.

I would be taking a foolish chance. But it was the only way to fight for my future, to better myself, to garner knowledge which might help me later. I would learn the language of our most important allies-Britain and the United States. In many other countries, this new language might help me. Using knowledge, I would look to the future, and prepare myself for a new life. Studying English would help me focus on that new life, not on past losses. I needed such a focus, almost as much as I needed air to breathe. I threw aside caution and went back to the bookstore.

"Can you order this for me from Berlin?" I asked the owner, casually.

"Yes, yes. I will write to the publisher in Berlin. I cannot be sure of the shipments, you understand. The war has disrupted so much."

"I understand. Please try," I said calmly.

"I will. Please check back with me. It will take some time."

If the course came, I would find a way to minimize the risk of studying.

"Father, I will make you proud of me," I told his image in my mind. His wishes would be my guide.

For the first time a small measure of peace entered me, and I managed to sleep that night. By following the path my father had laid out for me, I would honor his memory. Never would I take for granted the love of learning he had instilled in me. I

would build on it. I would not waste my mind. And when the war was over, I would be better equipped to search for Szymek too. My ability to hide my inner feelings returned. I had a goal.

I went back to the bookstore twice. Nothing had arrived. But the third time, four weeks later, the course material was waiting for me. I paid for the box-no bigger than a thick book, and carried it back to the camp, hidden under my coat. Inside the box were thirty thin pamphlets, each covering a single lesson. The next day, I took two pamphlets to my office, tucked beneath my coat. I might endanger myself by this study, but I had chosen to live. I hid the pamphlets under the drafting board. Fortunately, Fraulein Dichter never went into my office. Instead she used to shout to me from her office when she wanted something. Herr Muller came in only occasionally. I usually heard the noise of his bicycle returning just before his visits. That gave me time to hide the pamphlet under the drafting board. There was a five-centimeter gap between the board and the table. It made an ideal space to hide my valuable English lessons. I could always pretend to put some finishing touch on the drawing fastened to the board. With care, my English studies would remain a secret.

I began to delve into English for two hours a day, after I had finished my drafting assignments. Herr Muller assumed that the drafting took all my effort and time, but really I was able to complete the drawings and calculations in a fraction of the time I was expected to take.

The first lesson surprised me very much. It was about the Great Fire of London at the time of the bubonic plague, in 1666. The language was quite advanced, and I

wondered how I could possibly learn it alone. But since the text was laid out in sets of three parallel lines-the first line the English text, the second the pronunciation with hints in German, and the third, the German translation, I was able to work my way through the lesson.

The first English words I learned in my life were *conflagration*, *calamity*, and *distress*.

At first I felt great fear each time I brought out the course materials. Then I devised a story to tell Herr Muller if he caught me. I rehearsed it carefully in my mind.

"Herr Muller," I would say, "I have already been of use to *Firma Stoye* by knowing Polish, German and some Russian. I can translate to the workers. Now that England will be conquered soon, you will probably get some workers from Britain. I am sure it will be useful for you to have a translator who speaks English, to help direct them. That is why, when I have finished the drafting you assign me, I use any time left to study this language. So I will be more use to you and the Reich. The course comes from a German bookstore, and I bought it using the wages I earned here."

This seemed the best lie to use. Once I had worked it out, I was able to relax a little more. I felt sure that lying was ethical under my circumstances. Anything which would help me trick the Nazis and survive was correct.

My Dutch friend Otto spoke English, but I said nothing to him about my studies. After three months of focused work, I was ready to surprise him. We had resumed meeting for games of chess each week. I never told him the real reason for my absence. One night I addressed him in English.

"I am pleased to see you this evening," I said.

"Miecio, you sly boy! Have you been hiding a knowledge of English from me all this time?" he asked me in English. He was a picture of astonishment.

I laughed. I was happy with the effect of my surprise. "No," I said. "I have been studying English for three months now. What do you think?"

"But this is wonderful! How on earth have you done this? Tell me everything!"

I returned to speaking German after that, but I was pleased. For the first time I had spoken English and heard it spoken. I had understood Otto's replies and he had understood me. After that Otto helped me with my English whenever we were alone. His pronunciation was much better than mine, and I was glad to have my grammar corrected.

At night, when the pain of loss gripped me strongly, I practiced my English. "For you, Papa," I mouthed into the darkness. "I remember you every day." And I planned to impress Szymek when at last we were reunited. I kept a firm hold on that belief.

Seasons passed in the camp. Spring rains made the earthworks muddy and slippery. My barrack-mates returned to camp with mud caked to their shoes, arms and hands. Those who had fallen wore mud on their faces, legs and bodies. The summer sun dried the mud. Meadow-flowers blossomed in the fields outside the camp and I focused on the natural wonders of the season. We saw a few farmers tilling fields in the distance. I suspected many young farmers had been taken away to fight in the army.

We became glad for the shade of the trees when the heat of summer hit. Their shade kept my office from becoming too hot, as well as cooling the boys working in the

forest. The outdoor workers were badly bitten by flies and mosquitoes, though. My barrack-mates complained about the insects non-stop at first. They scratched and swore at night. In the office I was protected from the flies. Some of our group were put on latrine duty-digging new holes, spreading lime on the waste and burying old waste.

"This is what the Germans think of us. Just good enough for digging crap!" they grumbled.

Whatever they did, flies swarmed the latrine in the warm weather.

The move from painter to draftsman deprived me of the extra food that I had been receiving from the Italians. Hunger gnawed at me. I lost weight again and began to feel sapped of energy. I needed to trade something for extra food, but what? I could think of nothing, until a chance conversation gave me an unimagined opportunity.

Once in a while Herr Muller took me to a building site to check the dimensions. On a site one day I saw Bruno, my former painting foreman.

"Herr Wośko! How pleasant to see you. Are you enjoying your new work?" he asked. He smiled at me, but I noticed new lines of sadness on his face. It would have been rude to speak of them, so I stayed with the safe topic of work.

"I enjoy it very much," I replied. "Thank you again for recommending me."

"And your German improves also! Good. Very good. But you are looking thin."

"It is nothing," I lied, though he must have guessed my predicament. "I miss the singing of the Italians," I confessed, seeking out another safe topic.

Herr Bruno smiled again, though the smile did not reach his eyes. "The singing of the Italians gets better and better. I enjoy it very much. Yesterday they sang a libretto in

parts. The Italians are all artists with the paintbrushes, too. Their work is flawless, just as your own was."

"I trained as a portrait artist before the war," I said.

"Really? I did not know that." His eyes lost their distant look and became interested.

The next time I met him Bruno handed me a small photograph of his son. "He was killed on the eastern front. I got word three weeks ago."

"I am sorry to hear that, Herr Bruno," I said, and found that the feeling was real. I liked this warm man, and regretted that the war had taken away his son. His sadness was explained. I think that was the first time I lamented the death of a German soldier.

"Thank you, Herr Wośko," Bruno said softly. He cleared his throat. "It would be a comfort to have a larger portrait of my son. Could you draw me one?"

"I would be glad to do so."

"May I pay you in food?" Bruno asked. He had probably seen the Italians giving me bread, and said nothing. His question showed the kindness of the man.

"Yes. I would appreciate that," I said.

"For a good portrait I will give you a loaf of bread and margarine."

"Agreed."

Bruno gave me a large roll of very thick paper and the photograph. I could see that it was not easy to part with the photograph. "I will take care of it," I promised.

For the first time I had a job for the Germans I could put my heart into. I wanted to do my best for my old foreman. To make the larger drawing as accurate as possible I

decided to use my training as a draftsman. Very lightly I drew a grid over the photograph, and then the same grid six times larger on the stiff paper. The grids guided me in getting the proportions correct. I used a soft pencil to draw the portrait, square by square, often standing back to check the whole. This I did in my office, after my drafting work was done. It was easy to erase the grid lines from both photograph and portrait when I neared completion. Two weeks of careful work and the portrait was finished. Comparing it to the photograph, I was satisfied with the result. The young man in the portrait was easily recognizable as the one in the photograph.

"Yes," Bruno said, wiping a tear from his eye. "You have captured his brave spirit." He smiled. "Thank you. The work is good." Bruno showed the portrait to Herr Muller. "Herr Wośko has done this for me in his spare time," Bruno explained. "Your draftsman has many talents!"

"I am impressed," Herr Muller said. "And his work has not suffered, either."

"There are other men who might want such a portrait. Are you willing to do more?" Bruno asked me.

"Gladly," I said, "but always on my time off, so the drawings will take some time."

Bruno gave me a pound of very fine bread, a thick slice of salami and a large block of margarine as payment for the portrait. All of the food melted in my mouth. Since it was intended for Germans, it was of the best quality. The flavor of the salami came near to bursting my taste buds. I had forgotten the taste of meat. Thanks to Bruno, for the first time in uncounted weeks, my belly was full and satisfied. I made the treats last for a

whole week. Very soon some of the elderly Germans approached me with requests to draw their own portraits as well as those of their relatives. My diet improved with every portrait I drew, and soon I felt stronger. The marches to and from work became a pleasant exercise, instead of a burden. My health improved. The normal urges of teenaged boys returned. I began to dream of girls.

CHAPTER 22 - Ninochka

Time in the camp was marked by the clanging of a bell that announced time to awaken, time to eat, time to march to work, to take a brief midday break for a little bread and water, to march back to the camp, to eat the main meal, for lights out. In between these signals we had only a vague idea of the time passing-with one exception. Three times a day the Russian girls sang as they marched to work. In the gunpowder factories they worked in three shifts, and they passed my barrack at 5:00 a.m., 1:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m. They sang Russian songs-beautiful melodies, in loud voices. Some of the boys objected to being awakened at 5:00 a.m., but their singing was so lovely that I was always glad to hear it. One of their favorite songs was "*Volga, Volga mat rodnaya, Volga ruskaya rieka,*"-"Volga, Volga, true mother, Volga our Russian River."

When I looked in the light of day I saw the girls marching in columns, eight abreast, from their own segregated camp within our camp to factories in the forest. Most of them were young and pretty, but their faces had turned yellow from the sulfur used in making gunpowder. With so few girls in our lives, it was easy to overlook their yellow skin, and find them attractive. I began to watch them whenever I could, and search for faces I liked. Ivan, Otto and Wladek satisfied my needs for friendship well enough, but my interest in girls made me restless. I was not the only one. As the months lengthened into years, boys began to complain.

"How can the war go on this long? The girls of my village won't wait for me forever."

"What makes you think they would wait a day for you?" scoffed the others.

"This life of all work and no women is getting to be miserable," said another.

"Come on, Piotr! Everyone knows you're making it with your Russian girlfriend."

Their conversations about girls became coarser as time went on. I tried not to listen. I could never tell if they really had romances, or if their boasts went far beyond their experiences.

On Sundays the Russian girls were allowed to leave their segregated area and mingle with the workers from the whole camp. Many boys took the opportunity to talk with them, to hold hands and find some romance. By the time I had the nerve to approach a girl, I had learned enough Russian from Ivan to get by. Many of the Russian girls were well educated, since university courses were free in the Soviet Union.

First I met Vera. She looked to be about twenty-five, and had been a medical doctor in Kiev. Older and more mature than I, she was a warm and pleasant companion. I enjoyed talking to her. She easily forgave my mistakes in her language, correcting me with good humor. She explained the illnesses that passed through the camp. "Our diet is missing some important ingredients. Without green vegetables and fruit we become ill much easier. And of course hunger makes us susceptible." I was fascinated to hear how certain vitamins are actually needed for our organs to function. "Without vitamin A, from yellow and orange vegetables, our vision deteriorates. The vitamin is essential for good night vision, especially. As we use our eyes, we use up the vitamin, and it needs

replacing. A is one of the vitamins our bodies cannot make."

She told me about life in the Soviet Union, and I told her about Poland.

"In the Soviet Union, a bright young man like you would have gone to high school and then university easily," she said. "Free schooling is one of the great gifts of Communism. A good mind should never be wasted. You are capable of much more than digging potatoes, or even drafting. Perhaps you would like to become a doctor, too?"

Getting that amount of education seemed quite impossible to me at the time, but I was flattered by Vera's words. "Tell me what other advantages you think Communism has," I asked her.

We had long discussions about politics, and I enjoyed learning more about the Soviet system.

"No one is left this hungry in my country," Vera said emphatically. Then she shrugged. "But here in Germany we Russians are forced labor. What can we expect from our enemies?"

I was comfortable with Vera. I dared to ask her, "Does it bother you to make ammunition for your enemies? Though we have no choice, we are all helping them make the tools of war, and ultimately kill our own countrymen."

Vera saw my serious look. "Have you lost sleep thinking about this? Feeling guilty?"

I nodded unhappily. Though I knew resistance could only bring death, or perhaps transport to a worse camp where the workers were treated much more brutally, I had often thought of it.

"You had no more choice than I, in working here, then?"

"That is true. Poland was taken by force, and our people are used as slave labor," I replied. I did not worry about Vera guessing my secret. To her I was a Pole, pure and simple, just a little different from the men from the Soviet Union.

"Then you must not berate yourself. It is an outrage to work in this way for the Germans, true. It goes against our will. But to condemn yourself for what you are forced to do would only be adding to the sufferings the Germans have brought upon you and your nation."

I frowned. "Go on."

Vera nodded. "Communism has taught us much about resistance. The common man or woman can do nothing alone. Only in a group, a large group, can resistance work. Here, if you stopped working, you could easily be punished or shot to inspire fear in the rest of your countrymen. Do not do it! Keep your life to fight another day. If, however, the Germans did not have such tight control here and in the surrounding lands, perhaps we would have a chance. For that to work the entire camp would have to join in protest. And we could still be killed, becoming only martyrs to the cause. We speak often of this among the women. We remember the great movements for freedom in Mother Russia. But here we can find no sure footing for resistance and no support. It would be hopeless to try."

I nodded. "I know of one camp in Poland-a brutal one, where the prisoners rose up and killed their captors early in the war. I do not know whether they managed to survive, though."

Vera found this interesting, but she counseled me against rebellion. "We are deep inside Germany here, and the enemy is so strong that whole armies have been defeated by them. Our greatest act of resistance must be to survive and go on."

"My father told me this, before we were separated," I admitted. "Sometimes it does not seem to be enough."

"Sometimes survival is all there is," Vera said sympathetically. "Your father sounds very wise. Does he still live?"

"No," I said, dropping my eyes.

Vera reached out and squeezed my hand. "I will not ask you to relive painful memories. Honor him with your life, though, and you are the son he deserves."

I never made my peace with working for the Germans, whether I shoveled dirt, painted or drew factory plans. But I realized Vera was right. I had no choice. Even without knowing my secret, she had spoken well. The Germans did not care how many Poles they killed. Martyrdom would not bring back the dead. Living on I would be a true memorial to my people.

"I have seen a terrible form of resistance." Vera shuddered. "As our people retreated before the German army, they could not carry everything. Comrade Stalin told us to destroy all valuables left behind, including food and shelter. The Russian people were brave enough to obey. I saw farmers weep as they slaughtered their cattle and set fire to barns and houses. All that fertile land is laid waste, now, to starve the enemy. Even if some of my people survive to return, their homes are burned shells, with nothing to support life." Tears escaped from her eyes.

"That is terrible," I said, moved by her account.

"Even worse things happened near Kiev around that time, too," she told me.

"What happened?"

"One day German soldiers herded thousands of Russian Jews toward a ravine called Babi Yar. They say more than thirty thousand people were taken there, and shot-men, women and children together. The Germans made them stand at the edge of the ravine, so their bodies would fall into it. Then they exploded the sides of the ravine. Earth came down and buried the victims."

The horrific picture paralyzed me at first. I groped for words. "Thirty thousand men, women and children! My God! How can human beings behave so barbarically," I said, my voice hoarse. Tears came to my eyes because Vera, a Christian, felt the loss of my people at Babi Yar as Russian losses, and took it hard.

"Russians fell helplessly before the German army with its tanks and guns," Vera said. "Once they were through with the Jews, Christian Russians were next. The Germans took the young and able to work here and in other camps. Many thousands were marched to labor camps. So, we came here. It is a better fate than many others." Vera paused. "Some memories are hard to hold." She nodded briskly. She dashed away tears from her face. "We are still alive. That is enough, for now."

We never spoke of these atrocities again.

Though thin, Vera was a grown woman over twenty years of age, with a pleasing figure. One Sunday she smiled at a couple coming out of the bushes behind one of the barracks. "Would you like to go into the bushes with me?"

Vera's matter-of-fact suggestion caught me completely off-guard. I was too shy to respond. I pretended I had not heard her, and continued our conversation instead. After that I felt a little ill at ease with her.

Vera introduced me to Ninochka, a delicate, gentle, small girl, about twenty, closer to my age. Ninochka was an art student, also from Kiev. She had overheard some of Vera's stories.

"When did the Germans bring you here?" I asked Ninochka.

"Late in 1941, with many other girls," she said

One day she surprised me by asking if I was the portrait painter the Germans talked about.

"Yes, but I don't pretend to be a real artist," I said. "It's just a way to earn some extra bread."

"All real artists pretend they have no talent to begin with. That is because they can never achieve what they want to on the canvas." She smiled warmly at me. I laughed and said she was shamelessly flattering me. She laughed in turn. We began to speak much more often, first about the challenges and pleasures of drawing and painting. Ninochka had done some artwork already.

"When I paint something or sculpt something I forget the whole world and all my worries. If only I had paints here."

"I might be able to get you a pencil and some paper. Would you like that?"

Her eyes shone. "Miecio, could you really? That would mean so much to me!"

"Would you let me see your drawings? Perhaps you could help me become better

at drawing portraits?"

"Now you give me something precious to look forward to each Sunday. To meet with a fellow artist!"

I smuggled the small stub of a broken pencil to her and some discarded paper from the office. Thus began my first friendship with a girl. Ninochka reminded me of my mother, with her patient, understanding and supportive ways. Though I continued to protest that I was no artist, she encouraged me and showed me how to shade the features on a face to give it more depth, how to show light in the eyes and on the hair. I practiced drawing with her and learned a great deal. She was very talented.

"This is very good," she told me sometimes. Then with a few deft strokes she would improve my drawing, as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

Soon I wanted to share my extra bread with her. She refused, but I insisted, "You are helping earn it with your drawing lessons." It warmed my heart to see her gain a little weight.

"There is nothing better than getting lost in the joys of creating something," she said.

"Is that all you need to make you happy?" I teased her. "Materials to do your art work?"

"No, dear Miecio. My father had much to say to me on this subject."

"Please tell me," I urged her.

"Different things make different people happy," she replied, "though everyone seeks happiness. Some people need plenty of money-that would be enough to solve all

their problems and make them happy. For others money might help, but they need something more. If people think only of wealth and how to get and keep it, money might prevent their happiness. Have you ever known a rich, miserable person?"

"I have never known a rich person, so it's hard for me to judge. But I think I see what you mean. Enough money would provide good food, shelter, clothing and even luxuries, but I would never be satisfied just with that."

She smiled. Ninochka's smiles were like the sunlight. They lit her whole face until her eyes sparkled warmly. "Neither would I. Many things are important to happiness, but we take a lot of them for granted until we lose them. Like freedom and health, don't you think?"

"I agree. I never thought of my good health until the war came."

She nodded. "But if there were no war, if one had the ordinary things, I think there are really only two things that are important to happiness."

"What, my little sunbeam?"

She blushed and gave me a playful push. "Be serious, Miecio. Are you listening to me at all?"

"I am listening, I promise. Go on, please." She gave me a look of mock anger out of the corner of her eye. I had to laugh. Her quicksilver good humor always raised my spirits. I could never get enough time with her to satisfy me. "No, no. I will be serious," I promised. "I really want to know what you think."

"All right. For me to be happy, first I need a skill that warms my heart and I love to use. Then, earning a living isn't a chore; it becomes a pleasure instead."

"Like your art."

"Exactly." Her eyes became shy. "Second, I would need a partner I love and fully trust; we would go through life together. Then coming home after work would be like arriving at a safe harbor."

"Do you know what I think?" I asked her.

"How would I? Like all boys, you are a complete mystery to me," she said.

"But you know everything about me," I protested. "Every detail!"

She laughed again. I felt the warmth of her laugh all through me. "All right," she said, giving in. "What do you think?"

"I think your father was a very wise man, and he taught you well. But to find the right person to love, and the right skill to warm one's heart is not so easy for most of us. You will become a great artist someday. I have no idea what I should become."

"Whatever you choose to be, I am sure you will be good at it," she said.

The time we spent together seemed to fly by. We talked, laughed and drew pictures. We could spend hours just drawing a blade of grass, or admiring the clouds in the sky. I never even thought of kissing her. Did that make me sound crazy? Just to be in her presence was a joy. I looked forward to our time together every Sunday.

"I used to wish the war was over with all my heart," she told me one day.

"Of course. We all wish that. How could you wish anything else?"

She smiled and ducked her head. I could not see her face, since she only came up to my shoulder in height. "But when the war is over we'll go home, me to Russia and you to Poland. Then we won't see each other again."

"We can write to each other," I suggested, warmed by her affection. "I would not like to lose our friendship either."

She gave me one of her dazzling smiles. "Good. It is decided then. We will be friends forever. We will write to each other, and then visit whenever we can."

"I promise."

She glowed. "I promise too."

"But will you still want to know me when you are a famous artist?" I asked. "Maybe I'll be too humble a man for you then."

"Don't be silly, Miecio! You will always be my dear friend."

My barrack-mates began to tease me about Ninochka, but I didn't mind. They may have been jealous. She was among the prettiest of all the Russian girls.

With every month Ninochka and I became closer. I had never dreamed I could feel any kind of happiness in the midst of the war, but with Ninochka I had a new love of life, an awareness of beauty beyond anything I had experienced before. Whenever I met Vera she smiled at me in a motherly way. "Ninochka used to cry for her home," Vera confided in me once. "Now your friendship makes her the happiest of the girls. Her good nature keeps us all hopeful, even on bad days."

The sorrow that lay inside me, where the memories of my parents were kept, seemed less heavy with each week. I could not believe the beauty of the summer flowers. I picked some and took them to Ninochka. She blushed and inhaled their fragrance of the flowers. "How beautiful, Miecio! Thank you! Look at the texture of the white petals on this one!"

Ninochka taught me to see details in nature which had passed me by before. I wished she had met my parents. I longed to tell her all about my real life and my struggle to escape the Nazis. I managed to tell her bits of my real story, without giving anything away. Instead of lying to her, I avoided topics too close to my masquerade.

"Was Kiev a beautiful city?" I asked her one day.

"Very. Here, I will draw for you my favorite buildings and towers."

Summer hurried by. We never ran out of things to share. Ninochka wished she could have paints to capture the ravishing fall colors. I had been able to buy her some artists' pencils and paper in town, but no paints were available. "Never mind. We will paint them in our minds," I said.

One night a loud explosion shook the barracks.

"What was that?" the boys asked, in the dark bedroom.

"One of the bunkers must have exploded."

"I bet it was one of the ones where they make gunpowder. You know. Where the Russian girls work."

"Are you sure? It might have been a bomb."

"We would have heard the plane. I was awake and I heard nothing. I'm sure it was one of the bunkers."

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I hope the bunkers don't blow up while we're working on them!"

I said nothing, because a blade seemed to have cut into my chest. Ninochka was working in one of those bunkers. I knew she was on the night shift this week. Her life

might have come to an end with that explosion. Or she could be in another bunker, built a hundred meters away for safety. There was no second explosion. I had no way to find out who had been killed or injured until the next Sunday. Ominously, the songs of the Russian girls turned to laments-songs of mourning for lost loves, lost heroes, lost soldiers. We knew that death had visited our camp. But who had been taken? We could get no reliable list of names, just maddening rumors. I ricocheted from despair to hope with each whisper of a girl's name. The Russian camp was closed behind barbed wire, guarded by armed soldiers. In an agony of doubt I waited as the slow days passed.

On Sunday morning I paced by the gate of the Russian enclosure. The instant it was unlocked, I rushed in. Russian women and girls walked out. But I did not see the shining smile of my dear friend.

"Ninochka! Ninochka!" I called.

Already I was ready to burst. Usually she waited by the gate for it to be unlocked, smiling at me from the other side of the barbed wire fence. No one in the crowd that surged through the gate met my eyes. At last I saw Vera. She came to me and took my hands.

"Miecio! I am so sorry. Twenty-five girls were killed when an ammunition bunker exploded last week. Ninochka was one of them."

"No! It can't be. She was fine only last week! She was working on a drawing."

"Miecio! Look at me."

I looked into Vera's kind eyes and saw tears running from them. "I am so sorry. Your friend Ninochka is dead. She felt no pain. We are sure they felt nothing. Something

sparked the powder and the whole bunker exploded in an instant. There were no survivors."

I covered my face. Vera pulled me to her and held me while sobs shook my body. Now I knew what people meant by a broken heart. The torn fragments of mine seemed to fly apart in my chest. I had already lost so many people I had loved. How could I feel so much pain again?

Sensibly, Vera did not offer me any other words of comfort. She just held me. And when I pulled away from her, mumbling my thanks, she nodded and let me go. I went to weep in the cover of the trees. Many months passed before I had any interest in meeting other girls.

I cursed the war, which cared nothing for the innocent lives it took. The Germans had killed Ninochka as surely as if they had shot her. They had captured her and brought her here to work in their unsafe munitions factories, to make weapons for taking more lives. *They* had started the war, and *they* were to blame. I had trouble being polite to the German soldier who next asked me for a portrait. Even a soldier is a man first, I had to tell myself. But the German people kept this war going with their lust for world dominance. I hated them. Wladek drew me aside one day.

"Ninochka was a lovely girl. I am sorry for the death of your friend. But do not brood so, Miecio. Hate Adolf Hitler, if you wish, but not all Germans. These old men here had as little choice as we in this war," he told me.

I was not yet ready to give up my anger. It helped drown the inner ache. Later, though, I remembered Wladek's words, and they helped me. I remembered then the dead

boys whose portraits I drew. The Germans lose loved ones in the war too, I told myself. Wladek, Otto and Ivan all sought me out to comfort me. When I was able to notice the seasons again, it had begun to snow. Gentle flakes fell in clumps from a pewter sky. Tears gathered in my eyes. Ninochka would never see the beauty of snow again. But her great love for natural things made me see the winter with different eyes. Ninochka had given me the eyes of an artist.

CHAPTER 23 - The Jew Exposed

Vera returned the drawing paper I had given Ninochka to me and some of her drawings. "She would have wanted you to have these," Vera said. But I insisted on giving the best of Ninochka's drawings to the Russian women's barracks. Girls I had never spoken to thanked me. "True art brings cheer to us in this dismal place." I used the rest of the precious drawing paper for portraits of the fallen sons and relatives of the German guards.

Time passed in the routines of trying to earn enough extra food to keep hunger at bay, of learning and practicing my English, while still doing enough in my office to satisfy my boss, Muller. I continued acting the Christian in my barrack, sleeping lightly on my stomach, on guard against discovery.

I gave Otto a sketch of his face with his cynical smile to celebrate our friendship. He framed it in wood taken from the back of his bunk, and hung it in a place of honor. He embraced me like a brother. I gave a second drawing to Ivan, showing him with his violin in hand. Ivan declared I was the kindest of friends. Ivan, too, mourned the death of the Russian women for a long time. Though he had not been close to any of the girls killed in the explosion, he wept at the waste of lives in the service of war. "We Russians feel all things deeply. It is no shame to weep for young lives snuffed out in such a senseless way." For a long time his attitude comforted me. I was gloomy and bitter. I managed to hide most of my feelings from my roommates. How I wished I could confide in Szymek!

Boys and young men complained constantly about the length of the war. They had

expected a short stint in Germany, and years were passing instead. We had arrived in November, 1942, and it was already fall of 1943. Would the allies never vanquish the German military machine? Would Hitler's reach never exceed his grasp? What had happened to Churchill's brave words of victory? To the American president's promise to Europe of delivery from oppression?

"We are prisoners here, laboring like animals," my barrack-mates grumbled.

"What did you expect? A holiday at the expense of the Germans?"

They quarreled often. I joined in the arguments from time to time, to avoid looking different.

One day Otto presented me with a birthday present. He had arranged for me to get a haircut. I had lost track of the date—December 13. I had just turned twenty. The Dutch barber, whose name was Hans, had a small mirror, and he proudly handed it to me to examine his handiwork. I looked automatically at the short hair, pleased, looking more Slavic than ever, and then saw the face on the glass with a start. I hardly recognized myself. I had grown into a young adult. After a moment of confusion, I saw my former self in the mirror. Then the changes. My eyes were sad and a little guarded. My face was thin-too thin, and serious. I looked older than my years. But then Otto poked me, and I smiled my thanks. I glimpsed my old self in the new face, though the smile was strained.

"Where is Davidek—my father's son?" I asked myself. Now I was Miecio Wośko. I had not heard Friday night prayer or been to synagogue for so long. Who was I? Did the old David still exist inside the years of lies? Could my parents still be alive? It was almost

impossible to believe that they were. But Richard had not known the names of the elderly Jews executed in Urzedow. I squashed my unreasonable hopes. Many younger and healthier people than they had long ago perished. They could not possibly have escaped. Their deaths replayed in my head. Where had the bullets hit their bodies? Did they die at once, or linger, to bleed to death in their own graves? Sometimes dark thoughts vanquished me, and I lay spent on my bunk. I was stepping into the madness again, and that way lay peril. How could I help myself? As so often before, my thoughts turned to Szymek.

In my head I began to write to him again. It was possible he was still alive. Putting into words all my pent up feelings, as well as the details of my life, gave me a sense of myself again. When my father had shown me the precious value of books, I had not understood the power of words. Now I found that writing dissipated the worst of my gloom. Looking forward to finding Szymek after the war gave me hope, when I had lost it. How could words in my head do so much? If I only had power over my own thoughts, that was something. I could still be David inside. I pictured Szymek clearly in my mind.

My Dear Szymek,

When I think of you I remember who I am. I have never needed your indomitable courage and your unfailing good humor more. And of course, your famous stubborn spirit! To outlast the Germans-that is a hard task! But I will do it for you. I will yet march up to you, and look into your mischief-filled eyes. I will pound you on the back and buy you beers. First I will tell you everything I have seen and done. No, even better. I will write it all down so I forget nothing, and

give it to you. And you will tell me all that has befallen you. Then we will drink to our ageless friendship until every sadness of this too-long war is washed away. I promise you!

No one saw the silent tears that rolled from my eyes as put my innermost desires into words-my hunger for peace and friendship without fear; my dream to earn a living from skills I hoped to acquire; my ache for freedom and pride in my true identity. And in the dark of night, when the snores and groans of hungry boys surrounded me, I prayed for your safety, for the safety for my people. "Let us prosper. Only give us peace!" My prayers were tangled together with wishes, hopes, nightmares. I did not believe in God in the same way as other Jews believed—with a blazing inner strength. I did not know if someone heard my words or not. But I could no longer hold them back. It felt better to express them. So many transports, so many camps, so many soldiers…Were any other Jews left alive in Europe anymore? And my city, Lódz-what was going on in the ghetto? Surely there were too many Jewish people there for them to vanish. But how had they survived the winters with little heat, and constant hunger? "Szymek, hang on if only for me! And I will hang on for you!" I promised.

Meeting with Karol, my Jewish friend, was a relief. When we were safely out of range of any prying ears, we dropped all pretense, and spoke of our fears openly. But we met seldom. It would arouse suspicions if we were seen together too much.

But one day in early spring Karol sought me out just after work. He was distraught. He nodded at me and we met behind the fully-grown bushes.

"I have only a moment. It is too dangerous to talk now. I've been caught," he whispered, as soon as we were alone. "This morning they condemned me! May God curse them all!"

"Who, Karol? You are not making any sense. Slow down. Tell me," I suggested, though his distress was contagious. My heart had started to pound, too.

"My work group! This morning they suddenly started to shout, 'Karol the Jew! Karol the Jew!' The Germans heard them. They meant to be heard! The foreman asked me to come to the main office. There the head foreman interrogated me. He said the doctor would examine me tomorrow."

"You denied it, of course."

"Yes, yes. I denied it. But now they will have the proof of my true identity. They will see that I am circumcised. Then they will know I am lying."

"Surely someone could make a fake birth certificate! Maybe some Christian Poles were also circumcised… Don't give up, Karol!" My mind began to race. This was our nightmare, come true.

"No one in the camp will fake documents. They are too afraid. And how could I even get the right kind of paper, the stamp… Oh, Miecio, I am a dead man!" He clung to me.

It was cool that evening, but the sweat of fear drenched him.

"Calm down!" I urged him. "There must be something we can do."

"There is nothing. The Germans have already contacted the Gestapo. I only wanted to warn you before I go, and say good-bye."

"Go? Where are you going?"

"I must escape. There is nothing else to do. Otherwise I am a sheep waiting for the slaughter."

"But where will you go? We are deep inside Germany here. No one will give you refuge. A running man will stand out. You will have to hide by day…" I desperately searched my mind for good advice, and found none-not a single word of encouragement. Sick with helplessness, I reached into my pocket and gave him my entire store of extra bread, already spread with margarine. "Good luck."

"Miecio, thank you. You are a good friend. Think of me."

He disappeared into the bushes, so no one would suspect we had been together.

I made my way back to the barrack alone.

The memory of Karol's terrified eyes haunted me that night. Where could he go? What would he eat, once the handful of bread was gone? Where could he hide, and not be recognized as an alien? The Germans were a law abiding, disciplined people. They would not risk themselves to help a suspicious foreigner. I was certain Karol would be recognized as a Jew and sent to a concentration camp for hard labor or execution. He was doomed. Was I also doomed?

How long would it be until the same thing happened to me? I thought I imitated Christian behavior better than he had done, but was I wrong? It would be so easy to trap me in the same way the workers had trapped Karol-with the single word, *Jew!* And if they did, I would be unable to produce the proper identification, and my circumcision would give me away. Richard would join in the accusations quickly. How would I escape?

Sleep would not come. Dreadful imaginings kept me tossing and turning until at 5:00 a.m. the songs of the Russian girls reminded me of Ninochka's death.

That day word traveled over the camp that Karol was gone. I never saw him or heard from him again. I never learned his fate. Not even a rumor returned to the camp about him.

Terror of discovery caught at my throat with every breath for weeks after. All my energy went into creating a blank mask of a face, and doing normal activities. Assuming I was still mourning Ninochka, my friends let my mood go without comment.

The Polish boys cuffed each other in friendship and spent long hours inventing new curses for the Germans. They laughed at their own crude humor and the fates they would like to see enforced on every German. They made a family for each other. I saw how that helped them keep up their spirits. Curse words and crude images did nothing to comfort or encourage me. Their language and manner just made me feel more set apart, more different. I summoned a few curses so I would not stick out. Faking it felt worse than ever. Isolation, in the midst of a crowd, haunted me. I had no one in the world, except Szymek, so far away.

All during that time I longed for the comfort of a girl's affection and support. Ninochka had been right. I needed a close relationship with a young woman, a soul mate who would love me, just as she had needed a loving man. In normal life I would have been dating for some time by now. Perhaps I would have found the right girl. Instead I was an aching tangle of longing and desire.

CHAPTER 24 - Lisa

I stayed away from the Russian girls. Their yellow faces and their language brought back too many painful memories of Ninochka. The camp housed only four other girls—the Polish girls who worked in the canteen, and occupied the headroom at the end of our barrack. Three of them dated the workers frequently. They had their pick of eager young men, since there were about fifty boys for each of them. Much conversation in the barrack was crude speculation about the latest couples, and how far they had gone.

The fourth Polish girl would not date anyone. Her name was Lisa and she was pretty, with a good figure. Because she never dated, the Polish boys considered her very special. Many were in love with her—the attractive, yet unattainable Lisa. I noticed her as much as any of them. She seemed to be better educated than the other girls. My friend Tom dated no one, but talked to all of the girls in a friendly way. The other boys grilled him for details of the girls' lives and thoughts. Tom laughed and said, "Ask them yourself. I only speak to them of the weather, the work. I have no knowledge to share." So he evaded the wrath of other suitors by remaining a friend to all, but never an object of special attention. Nearly every boy in my barrack had asked Lisa out, and received her polite brush-off. Tom and I watched her with deep interest, trying not to stare.

I was surprised to discover Lisa noticed me, too, out of all the others. Perhaps word of my portraits and my job as a draftsman had spread, and made her curious. For some reason, Lisa always smiled at me when we passed in the compound. I smiled in return. Every time I smiled at a girl I thought about my missing front teeth, and wondered if she thought me ugly. But

Lisa didn't seem to. Her smile was always very warm. She smiled at many other boys, too, but I became convinced that she gave her friendliest to me.

Though I did nothing about it, I began to feel powerfully attracted to her. I cursed myself for a fool. Why long for someone you can never approach? I knew if I dated Lisa all the Polish boys would be consumed by jealousy. They already suspected I was a Jew. If I succeeded in getting a date with Lisa they would never forgive me. A Jew triumphing where Christians had failed? They would hunger for revenge, and rush to denounce me. Then I would meet the same fate as Karol. Once the word *Jew* was shouted aloud, death would soon follow. Wladek had persuaded them to leave me alone. But they would not respect his authority if they were sufficiently outraged. I saw my peril clearly. My safety lay in avoiding the attention of the Polish boys. They must not think of me or care about me at all. My survival depended on keeping a low profile, and doing nothing to offend them or anyone else.

Feverishly, I considered my options. Could I meet Lisa in secret? No. That would be impossible. Soon we would be noticed slipping away at the same time to meet somewhere in private. Any nod or gesture between us would shout as loudly as words. Lisa was always watched by the boys, wherever she went. It would be like trying to date under a microscope. Then, as surely as night follows day, the outrage of the Polish boys would follow. And I would not be able to escape their rage. They might well denounce me, as they had Karol. It was so clear. I must avoid Lisa at any cost. I yearned for her, but said nothing, did nothing. I began to dream of her warm smiles, her bright, intelligent eyes, her soft lips. Every day I squashed my feelings and walked by her with the same, simple smile.

Then one day I saw her coming toward me. I stopped. We both smiled as usual. She

hesitated when she saw me standing still in her path, then approached. Then without any thought or decision, words came from my mouth.

"Lisa, may I meet with you? I like you very much."

What was wrong with me? How had those words found their way to my lips? Did I want to die so much? It will be all right, I reasoned. She would say, "I am sorry. I cannot," as she always said to the boys. This danger would pass. And I would never let myself step out of line again!

To my surprise Lisa answered, "That will be nice. Let's arrange it through Tom for this Saturday evening." She smiled again and walked on.

Everyone knew Tom was my friend. The plan was good. Except that all of my well-thought-out reasons for avoiding Lisa remained. I berated myself for an idiot. I told myself that Tom could cancel the date instead of making it, if I asked him to. I repeated all the arguments against the date to myself, over and over. But I couldn't make myself back out of the date now.

On Saturdays work in the factories finished early. Lisa's chores in the canteen did, too. She arranged through Tom to meet me secretly outside the camp on a side road near the weeping willow at 8:00 p.m. I tried to tell Tom to cancel the arrangement, but I couldn't make myself say the words. I was taking a terrible chance. I knew it, but I couldn't help myself. Lisa seemed to be everything I dreamed about, and she liked me. Out of all the camp workers, she liked me best.

This was the first date of my life. I didn't consider that Ninochka and I had dated. We had been the closest of friends. With Lisa, everything felt different. This was a real date, with romance in mind. I could hardly contain my nervous anticipation.

At six-thirty p.m. I sat on my bunk, waiting. Every possible danger ran through my mind over and over. Someone would see me leave. Someone would follow Lisa. Someone would be at the willow before us. One of the crudest boys would be there. He would taunt me, and run back to camp, and rouse the other boys. They would come in a pack and fall on me in fury. They would tell the German guards I was a Jew. The guards would demand to see more identity papers. I would be unable to produce them. The Gestapo would be called. They would torture me, or shoot me, or ship me to a brutal death camp. "Ask Tom," I told myself, "to cancel this date before it is the end of you!" I sat on my bunk and did nothing.

The bell in the guardhouse rang seven times—Seven p.m. It would take me less than fifteen minutes to walk to the willow tree. I checked my looks, tried to get my unruly hair to lie flat, dusted off my best clothes. The bell gave a short ring—Seven-thirty. I was ready to leave. It would be better to get there early. I jumped to the floor and walked at a normal pace out of the barrack, then out of the camp. When I reached the willow tree I noticed my hands were sweating. Lisa was not there. It was almost eight—our agreed meeting time. I waited, trying not to fidget. Fifteen minutes passed. Another fifteen minutes, and still she didn't come. After another fifteen minutes, confused, I returned to the barrack. I felt humiliated, as if someone had slapped my face. But I also felt relief. More than anything, I was puzzled. What had gone wrong?

The creaking of a door opening alarmed me. Tom rushed into my room.

"Miecio, it is bad," he whispered. His eyes darted to the closed door, the window, back to me. I had never seen him so upset. "I said nothing, I swear! I don't know how they found out!"

A painful spasm shot through my stomach. "Who?"

"Four of them—Bolek, Andrzej, Wojciech and Kazik. You know, from the room across

the hall," he gestured toward the other side of the barrack. "They waited for Lisa outside her door."

"What? Oh, no!"

"As soon as she opened the door they started chanting 'Lisa is seeing a Jew! Lisa is seeing a Jew!'"

A sick feeling swept over me, robbing me of words.

Tom gripped my arm and went on in his low voice, "Lisa went as white as death, she was so shocked. I waited nearby and saw them. Her hands trembled as she rushed back into her room and bolted her door. She will not come out for anything, now."

I opened my mouth and then closed it, without finding anything to say.

Tom shook me. "Miecio, pack your things and run. Don't you see? You are in mortal danger! Once the word *Jew* spreads in the camp and gets to the Germans, the Gestapo will seize you and shoot you."

I could not speak. I could not move. My nightmare was upon me, and I could do nothing.

"Miecio, what is wrong with you?" Tom hissed. "You have no time to lose. You have to escape now! Do you think I want to see you killed, my friend? Do you want to die?"

Want. What did I want? My thoughts seemed to be stuck in some distant place. I had given bread to two of the young men who had betrayed me. I had helped Wladek nurse one of them through influenza. They were my countrymen, fellow Poles. We should have stood together against our common enemy like brothers. But no.

I had foreseen exactly this, but now, presented with the reality, I was frozen. Paralyzed, unable to walk or talk, I lay down on my bed. All my dreams and hopes, all my struggles, all my

efforts at being accepted and bettering my chances for survival, all my lies—years of hard work, had come to this. I could feel nothing except black pain. "Lisa will never speak to me again," I thought, as if this mattered. But somehow it did. She had not spoken out in my defense. She hadn't uttered a sound, too afraid and shocked, I supposed.

I lay on my bunk like a piece of dead wood tossed up on dry ground after a hurricane. Stripped of hope, my whole body a frozen scream, I waited to be taken. I didn't care any more.

Nothing happened. No Gestapo, nothing but an eerie calm filled the barrack.

The next day was Sunday, and I lay in my bunk all day. I didn't eat. I didn't talk. My bunkmates ignored me. I said I wasn't feeling well. On Monday morning I went to work. I had no desire for food. What else was there to do?

The following day Tom took me aside. "Walk with me, Miecio," he said. We walked to the far end of the camp, and found a secluded place to talk.

"Sunday morning, those boys —the traitors—went to Wladek! I heard them talking to him. They insisted Wladek expose you, a Jew, to the Germans." Tom shook his head. "You know what these rough boys are like. They are older, but no different than when they arrived. They kept saying over and over, 'The Jews killed Jesus, and are now killing Christian children and draining their blood to make matzoh to eat! We cannot let the Jew keep hiding here!'" Tom looked at the ground. His face flushed. He seemed embarrassed. "Before I knew you, Miecio, I believed the same things. Now, I know you are a good man, that you would never do such unspeakable things. I thank God that you were here to help me in my illness, and I ask God to forgive my foolishness."

I squeezed Tom's arm. My voice came out as a croak. "You are a good man, too, Tom. I am glad I know you. I am glad you are my friend. You do not need to say anything to me."

"But I want to!" he protested. "Anyway," Tom said grimly, "Wladek wasn't having any of their stupid talk. He addressed them like an angry priest. You can tell he was a teacher. He can really scold when he wants to!"

A smile tugged at my mouth. "What did he say?"

"I wish you could have heard him, Miecio. He started out by telling them, 'You don't have to believe everything you were told.' There was so much scorn in his voice! 'Jesus was a Jew, believed and died as a Jew, and it was the Romans who crucified Him, not the Jews.'"

Tom nodded forcefully. I could see that my peril and Wladek's words had had a strong effect on him. His usually quiet voice picked up strength, and he imitated Wladek's words and manner of speech. "Then he went on, 'Jesus preached forgiveness and love for all human beings. Have you boys forgotten that? Jesus said we should change prejudice and hate into love and compassion.'" I snuck a look into the room, then, and the boys were hanging their heads like whipped dogs, and looking confused. "'But Wladek—!'" one of them started to say. Wladek stood over them and became menacing. "'You better shut up, boys, and go about your own business. Miecio is just as much a Pole as you are, if not a better one. He speaks better Polish than all of you and has read many Polish books. Don't you ever mention the word *Jew* again! Jesus would never forgive you.'"

Tom finished his story and smiled at me proudly. "I wish I were smart enough to say things like that. Anyway, no one in the barrack has said a word against you since then. They know Wladek is very respected by the Germans. They have gone back to their usual bickering

and quarrels."

I couldn't speak. Again Wladek had saved my life, and I knew he would have done the same for anyone. If Karol had been in our barracks, he might have survived under the protection of Wladek, with his clear sense of justice. If more Poles were like Wladek, perhaps the Germans would not have been able to kill and imprison Polish Jews at all.

I thanked whatever luck had put me in the same barrack as Wladek; I lived on only through his intervention. When I tried to thank him in person, Wladek hushed me.

"What kind of a man would let something wrong happen in front of him, and do nothing?"

"You have great courage," I said.

Another shrug. "Not nearly as much as you, my friend."

I came out of my stupor. I returned to working and visiting with my friends. I avoided the compound when Lisa was around; there would be no excuse for further rumors. She must have had the same desire to avoid me, after the terrifying scene in front of her door. As time passed, my affection for her slowly faded. Months rolled by without us exchanging another word.

CHAPTER 25 - News From Outside

"The valiant forces of the Third Reich have won victory after victory. In keeping with Adolf Hitler's master plan, our troops have left Russian soil. They leave it a broken nation. We stand fast in Northern Italy. Foolishly, the forces of the degenerate West have landed on the beaches of Normandy. They will soon feel the wrath of our Fuhrer and his loyal troops," said the voice on the radio. *"We have them trapped!"*

I stood quietly just outside the door of the German canteen. I heard the radio announcer's voice, but for a moment I did not take it in. My customers found it convenient to meet in their canteen. The Germans were used to me meeting someone here, to arrange for a portrait. None of them gave me a second glance. The Germans did not seem to notice that I always arrived at six p.m. sharp, in time for the news broadcast. I was hungry for news of the war, and unlike most workers in the camp, I had an excuse to be close to a radio.

The broadcasts always praised the German army and proudly listed victories. I don't think I ever heard the announcer admit to a defeat at the hands of the Allies. But beneath the surface of the strategic regroupings and retreats the truth about troop movements and setbacks could be inferred.

Vigor flooded my body as I digested the broadcaster's words. My heart leaped. The Red Army must have driven the Germans out of the Soviet Union! Germany would never withdraw otherwise. And if the Allies had landed in Normandy, France, they must have hopes of defeating

Germany on their own soil at last. What the broadcaster really meant was: *"The German army has been crushed in Russia. We are in retreat. The Allies have invaded France in force on the beaches of Normandy, despite our efforts to prevent it."*

I knew the Luftwaffe, the German air force, had pounded Britain for years. And German U-boats had sunk many Allied ships. The radio boasts were full of awesome numbers of losses on the Allies' side. But the armies of the West could not invade Europe without superiority in the air and on the seas. The Allies were acting at last! We had waiting so long, that I nearly missed the significance of the radio reports. I was intoxicated with hope. Germany was in retreat on all fronts. The years of German tyranny were coming to an end.

This happened in June of 1944. I was not the only one to realize the real meaning of that broadcast, and others that followed. In August the Germans were driven out of Paris, and the Poles at last rose and retook Warsaw. Though the uprising was crushed—the announcer dwelled a long time on the destruction of Warsaw—the whole of Europe was gradually slipping out of German hands. Greece was freed; then Rumania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia.

Throughout the camp we saw a change in the Germans' mood. From time to time the guards ventured a friendly grin for us. As summer came to a close, and the nights became increasingly cold, they gave out extra blankets to anyone who asked. They had always refused before. They allowed the sick to take time off work. They inquired about our health. They clucked sympathetically over each boy who had a fever.

Late in the summer word came of a group of German officers who had plotted to assassinate Hitler in July. Unfortunately, they had failed. The radio announcer condemned this small group of "arrogant traitors." The "beloved' Führer" purged the army of all resistance. What

was the truth behind this piece of propaganda? Were the Germans themselves in rebellion against their fanatical dictator? Had the Gestapo executed those in the plot against the Reich? At night I pictured Adolf Hitler finally humbled by the Allies, bowing to the British Prime Minister Churchill and the American President Roosevelt. Excitement filled me. Hitler would have to answer for his hideous crimes against my people. But the battles raged on, month after month. I began to realize that such an enormous conflict could not end quickly.

Impatiently I wrote to Szymek in my head. "I know the end is near. You must not get discouraged. You must not let the Nazis triumph over you now. The tension must be terrible there in Lódz, as you wait for the Allies to break the German defenses and liberate Poland. But hold on, my friend! We will drink to the victory of freedom yet!"

In the fall German radio continued to report victories. But they also reported the valiant German army "*abandoning worthless territories*." I translated all of these into defeats for the Germans.

One day that fall I arrived in the office to find Herr Muller already at work. I was ready for a new assignment, so I knocked on his door.

"Come in, come in, Herr Wośko! How are you this fine day?" he asked me.

"I am fine, Herr Muller. And you?"

"Never better, never better. Would you like some coffee? I was just telling Fraulein Dichter about the high quality of your work. I have great respect for you. Have I ever told you this? We are friends, after all, are we not? Making the best of a difficult situation. Yes. There is much goodwill for you here, you and the other workers, of course."

After he hired me, Muller had been distant in his dealings with me, for the most part. He

used to give me my assignments without any small talk. He had approved my work, but had never paused to chat. I hardly knew how to react to this sudden gush of affability.

"I am glad to hear it," I said quietly. I felt like a rabbit staring at the cougar's smile. What was behind this?

"I like to think of my workers as my family," Muller went on. "We care for one another; we help each other. Do you find your office to be warm enough? If ever you are cold, just ask the Fraulein to put more wood on the fire. We have no shortage of wood, eh?—here in the forest!"

His air of superiority had vanished. I thanked him, and went on as before. I did not trust this good mood.

The architect Herr Bauerhafer from Firma Stoye in Leipzig, who visited us periodically, went even further. While talking to me one day, he actually apologized.

"This emblem on my jacket," he confided, pointing to the sign of his membership in the Nazi party, "this means nothing to me. I had to join in order to keep my job, but in my heart I have never agreed with their goals. Please do not think of me as a Nazi. I am not really one of them."

I did not know what to say. Should I congratulate him? Should I condemn the Nazi party out loud? "I will remember you told me this," I replied, carefully neutral.

"Good, good!" He seemed relieved. "If there is anything you need, you have only to say the word." He winked at me. "We are friends, you and I, fellow workers, not enemies at all. You see?"

Suddenly I seemed to have a lot of unexpected friends.

"The German foremen are feeling their necks," Wladek told me. "They are afraid of what

might happen to them when the Allied troops come here. Will they be arrested as war criminals? Every German would like some friends among their enemies now. People who will speak in their favor when the end comes."

"Do you think the end is near?" I asked him.

"From what you have told me about the radio broadcasts, I do. But we must be careful. The Germans still have the guns. They can still do a lot of damage before the war is over."

That winter we marked the new year with fresh hope. Perhaps it would be our last in captivity.

One day as I studied English in my office, Herr Muller appeared at the office door. I had not heard him put his bicycle away. It was too late for me to hide my pamphlet under the drafting board.

"What do you have there, Herr Wośko?" Muller asked.

I handed the pamphlet to him. I had no choice. I waited for a reprimand, for his anger, for him to choose a punishment for me, to call in the Gestapo. Instead he looked at the pamphlet quite calmly and smiled at me. "Aha, you study English. You may find that useful one day," he said, and left.

Nothing happened. He ordered no punishment. As far as I could tell, he told no one else. He never spoke of the English lessons again.

In January 1945, Russian troops invaded Germany from the east. In February the Allies invaded from the west. There were no words sweet enough to disguise the truth as the radio announcer spoke. German boys aged fourteen to seventeen were given uniforms and guns. They were sent to defend their Fatherland at the river Elbe—children sent to sacrifice themselves on

the altar of war. We knew this river was not far from our camp. The dreary, cold days dragged by. We waited impatiently for news. Now that we smelled liberation in the air, the weeks seemed endless.

The first signs of spring arrived. Trees burst into leaf; flower buds appeared. Rumors filled the camp. The Russians were at the walls of Berlin. Hitler was captured; Hitler had been assassinated; Hitler was in flight. No reliable news could be had. All was chaos.

CHAPTER 26 - Confronting the Horrors

On May 8, 1945 we arose as usual, but the day was to be different. The guards had vanished. The camp gates were wide open. All of the Germans had disappeared.

We seemed to be free.

There should have been some sound, some spectacular clashing of cymbals at least. But there was no big bang, no fanfare. We had waited for freedom for so long—hungered for it, hoped for it. Now freedom had come as silently as a thief in the night.

The sun rose into an impossibly blue sky. The new leaves rippled in a soft breeze. Birds perched on the bell tower, and sang. Nature carried on, ignorant of and unimpressed with the change in our status.

We had no one to obey, no work to do. The camp inmates wandered the compound, stunned.

"Where have the guards gone?"

"Do you think the Germans will come back?"

"Is it safe to walk around, do you think?"

"I'm going to the German canteen. Maybe they left some food!"

"Where are the Allied soldiers? I want to see them with my own eyes!"

Wladek smiled at me. "The end has come at last, my friend. The Germans have surrendered. If not, they would have taken us with them as slave labor. The war is finally over!"

"Are you sure?" I asked him. "It is hard to believe."

His smile widened. "Sometimes the good things are as hard to believe as the bad."

I wanted to stand in the middle of the compound and yell out, "I am David Makow! I am a Jew! I fooled you all!" I had survived the war under my false name. I had survived in the lion's den. Now I did not have to hide my true identity. No punishment awaited me for being a Jew, no tortuous labor, and no death sentence.

"No. You must be careful," I said to myself. I was still in the center of enemy territory, surrounded by the same workers as before. I did not trust them. If they had wanted to expose me for execution before, would they feel any different now? What would they do to me, now that they were free to do as they liked? I had feared exposure for so long that anxiety lingered on. My fears had become a part of me; they crouched in the same place in my chest as always, like beasts waiting to rouse and rend me. Would I ever truly be free after this long nightmare? I asked myself. My masquerade was not over yet. I had to stay hidden until I was among real friends again.

So I said nothing, did nothing to reveal myself. I went to the office and construction site in the forest where I had worked for two-and-a-half years. The bunkers were empty; the paths were silent. Instead of the sound of shovels, I heard a soft sighing of pine needles far above my head. I seemed to be walking in a dream. I would awaken soon and find the distant guards barking commands. My body felt light, as if the wind could carry it away as easily as a dead leaf. I blinked, but the picture did not change. The door to the cabin of offices stood open. Muller must have left in a hurry with the retreating army.

The half-witted old German janitor sat on the steps. He looked up at me. "I hated Hitler,"

he said. He picked lint off his threadbare jacket. More than anything else, these three words told me I wasn't dreaming. The war must be over.

I went to the shed and took my overalls from the shelf. There was Muller's bicycle, abandoned. I could use it. But it wasn't mine. If I took it, wouldn't I be stealing? I hesitated. I had worked for the Germans for very little food and a pittance of pay for years. I had earned the price of that bicycle many times over. Now, the bicycle would be my pay. After all, the Germans had robbed me of everything I had—home, possessions, family, a normal life. I took the bicycle. It had been more than three years since I had ridden, but my body had forgotten nothing. I mounted it and peddled back to the camp.

Otto ran to me. "Is it true, Miecio? Is it over? Are there any guards in the forest factories?"

"None." I ran to embrace him.

"My friend, we have lived to see peace. We are lucky men," he said. "And you have acquired a fine new bicycle!"

"It was Muller's," I confessed, blushing. "He left it behind. Did I do wrong to take it, do you think?"

"No. You worked closely under Herr Muller. So of course you must take care of his bicycle for him, keep it well used, until he returns." Otto laughed. "Have you eaten?"

I shook my head.

"Then come to our Dutch canteen. At last I can invite you."

I smiled. "I will be glad to accept your invitation, after I have checked on my other friends. Go, and I will join you if I can."

At the Polish canteen I found Wladek organizing a meal. "Come, we will cook for ourselves." The Dutch canteen would have to wait. I could not refuse Wladek.

The food stores were thin, but we managed to put together a meal. "How will we feed ourselves later on?" I asked Wladek. "The supplies here are meager."

"This food will last until the Allied soldiers come," Wladek assured me. "All will be well, now. We must wait for instructions. The liberating army will get to us soon." Still the voice of order and reason, Wladek turned to break up a fight over food. "Will you boys turn on each other so soon? Eat your portion in peace or go hungry," he told them sternly.

The distant sound of a violin reminded me of Ivan. I went to see him. The Russians danced in their compound, with Ivan's music setting the tune. They stopped often to embrace each other. I saw men and women weep with joy. "Our comrades have liberated us," they told one another. "If only we could have been part of the fighting!"

When Ivan saw me he finished his tune with a flourish and threw his arms around me. "Someone said the Red Army is in Berlin," he cried. "Is it true?"

I nodded. I had gathered as much from the most recent radio announcements.

"This is a great day! Come, celebrate with us!"

To my delight, the other men seized me and drew me into an athletic dance. Ivan took up his bow again and I stumbled to learn the steps as the men whirled and kicked in their joy.

"Too much, too much!" I panted soon.

No one expressed the joy of liberation better than the Russians. I smiled as I watched them, until my cheeks ached. This was what had been missing from my life. They even had a few bottles of vodka that they passed around. "From the German canteen," a man told me with a large

wink. "They left it for us on purpose, so we could drink to freedom."

The Russian appetite for celebration soon wore me out. Exhausted by the celebrations, I went to my bunk early that night, and dreamed of being reunited with you, Szymek, and my parents. Are you free too? I asked you all in my dream. My beloved parents pressed their lips to my cheek and squeezed my arms. "As free as birds," Father said.

With the morning new rumors arrived in the camp. The German army had retreated too quickly to take all their provisions with them. In the nearby town of Torgau, warehouses full of fancy foods were open, with food free for all who came. We need only to go to Torgau and take it.

"There are tinned meats! Come! Before it is all gone, we'd better get some for ourselves."

The guards had left several bicycles. A few other fellows had appropriated them.

"Will you come with us?" I asked Wladek.

He shook his head. "It is wrong to steal anything, even food," he said.

"But surely the Germans owe us enough to fill our bellies," I said, taken aback.

"Go if you think so, but I will not."

The temptation was too strong. "I will."

"Ride safely then," Wladek said.

My hunger spurred me on. Our small group set out, leaving the barbed wire of the camp behind.

"Wladek doesn't understand," Tom said as we pedaled. "What we do not take, others will pick clean."

The countryside was quite deserted. We pedaled in silence. But my thoughts were far

from silent. "There is nothing wrong in taking food from our oppressors. They took so much from us," I told myself, over and over. After an hour of cycling we arrived in Torgau. We saw no Germans or soldiers of any kind. "I will raise my hand against no one," I promised myself. "I will take only what is abandoned." It was a compromise I thought I could live with. Through the deserted streets of Torgau we rode, until a warehouse came into sight. We entered, and my inner quandary died away.

Aghast, I looked at living human skeletons sitting amid open cases of food, stuffing themselves and washing down the food with wine. An entire warren of warehouses stood open to the elements. Every kind of edible luxury imaginable, even caviar, was there. But I could not take my eyes off the human wreckage to examine the food.

"Who are you?" I asked the first skeleton. Please, let this be a bad dream, I begged. Enormous hollow eyes turned to me. Was this a man or a woman, old or young? I could not tell. The flesh had shrunk from the bones of the face. Skin was stretched tightly over the bones, hiding the normal signs of aging. The mouth opened, but I could not hear the weak reply. I crouched close to this ravaged human being.

"Sarah," she whispered.

God forbid this suffering, I found myself praying. I knelt and opened a tin of meat for her. "Let me help you." She did not smile or flinch as I handed her the food. With a blank stare she shoved a handful of meat into her mouth and struggled to swallow. I searched through the packing cases. There must be some bread here somewhere—something easier for Sarah to eat. I found a fancy tin of crackers, and handed Sarah some.

"How long has it been since you ate?"

"I cannot remember," she said. After a few mouthfuls she fell asleep. I eased her down and put some cardboard under her head.

I walked on. Everywhere, it was the same. Fearful remnants of humanity sat among plenty, trying to ease their hunger. They said they had come from Lieberose.

"These people—" I said to Tom, choking. "What was Lieberose, in God's name?"

"It must have been a concentration camp," Tom said. "I heard about them before my capture. Camps where the Germans worked Jews and Gypsies to death. These people have been starved for years. May the Germans burn in hell for this outrage!"

My limbs refused to obey me. These were Jews. This was how the Germans had treated my people. If I had not hidden in Camp Vogelgesang, one of these broken human beings might have been me.

I stopped to help another of the skeletons find a meal. They were too weak to open most of the food packages in their hands. Tinned meats, crab, oysters—I plundered them all and placed the open tins in the hands of the starving people.

"Thank you," a man of bones whispered to me. Riveted by his shocking appearance, I did not realize at first that he had spoken Polish.

"You are from Poland," I said to him in our native tongue.

"Yes, from Lódz."

My heart skipped a beat. I ripped open a carton of spring water. Nothing but the best. "You must drink, too. Please." With some difficulty I forced a bottle open.

"I am Jacob," the man rasped. "You speak as I do."

"I am also from Lódz. Please, can you tell me what happened there? I left in December

1939. I have had little news since then."

He drank deeply from the bottle I handed him. "Ah. You were lucky to get out when you did. For two years I lived in the ghetto…"

He did not have the strength to go on. "I will bring you what you need. Rest now." I took off my jacket and draped it around his shivering frame. I made a cushion of cardboard and eased him into a more comfortable position. Every bone bulged beneath my hands. Horror skated along my nerves. "Szymek!" I cried in my heart. "God forbid you are this hungry." I rifled through more cases, at last finding some soup and a tin of cakes.

"Jacob." I lifted him in my arms. "Drink this slowly. Then a bite of sweet cake. Yes. That is it."

I did not have to urge him to tell his story. The words spilled out of him after he had eaten a little more. I leaned close to him, to hear his whispers.

"In Lódz, the Nazis did not care for our lives. They spilled blood casually. First we Jews were stripped of our jobs and incomes. We were forced to leave our homes and most of our belongings. We were allowed to take only one small bundle when they relocated us."

"Yes. I understand. Lean on me."

Jacob gulped soup.

"They relocated you…?"

"To the ghetto, in the poorest part of the city. We were unbelievably overcrowded there. We had to live two or three families to a room. Then the Germans began to take people away. They stuffed the weak, the old and the children into closed vans. The vans had special piping which carried engine exhaust into the passenger compartment. By the time the vans reached their

destination, the town of Chelmno, everyone inside—our parents, our children—were dead. One man did manage to escape, and he came back to tell us about Chelmno. My parents were weak. They went in the first vans. Two of my children, Ruth and Ester, caught typhoid fever. They survived for a while in the children's hospital. Then one day they marched the entire children's hospital away, and sent them to Chelmno. By then Chelmno had become a liquidation camp—a place to get rid of the unwanted. There bodies were buried in huge pits. Months later when the process of killing Jews in Chelmno proved to be too slow, thousands from the ghetto were shipped to Birkenau and Auschwitz—death camps. We were told they were going to the conquered Soviet territories to set up agricultural communities, or to labor. In the death camps efficient gas chambers ended their suffering and their bodies were turned to ashes in ovens."

No emotion showed on Jacob's ruined face as he spoke. He had passed beyond emotion some time during his ordeal. He had seen too much death. My stomach rose into my throat as he spoke. I had to turn away for a moment.

"Perhaps you would rather not hear these things, my son?"

I controlled my shudders and turned back to him. I needed to know the truth, and I was helpless under the spell of his story. "No, no. I must hear. If you have the strength to go on, please tell me more."

"The truth gives a man strength," Jacob whispered. "Able-bodied men were put to work in the ghetto. Factories were set up. How we worked! Backbreaking labor on a starvation diet. And when we were too exhausted to work, we went the way of the young and the old. The young, good-looking women were taken away separately. My wife Rachel was twenty-eight, like me. She went with the women on a special transport. Not to Chelmno. Nobody knows where."

Jacob's hands shook. He could hardly reach his mouth with the food. I broke a sweet cake into small crumbs and fed them to him a few at a time.

"They sent me to Auschwitz. In Auschwitz I saw my people going into the gas chamber, to their deaths with my own eyes. Before that they shaved the victims' heads and collected the hair. Later they removed the gold filings from the dead bodies and piled them into a great heap, ready to melt down. After cremation, the bones and ashes were made into fertilizers. Some Nazi guards boasted of having wallets and lamps made from Jewish skin..."

Nobody could be so callous, a voice inside me screamed. Not even Nazis could do such terrible things! Tears rolled down my cheeks, unnoticed. The truth could not be so ugly! But Jacob told me only what he had seen himself. His words penetrated my body like blades. Screams seemed to vibrate in my chest. I made myself hold Jacob gently and ask him, "But there were so many in Lódz. Surely the Nazis could not kill them all." The words were like broken glass in my mouth.

Some must have survived. Jacob had survived. Others were alive, too, surely. Szymek—!

"How did you survive so long?" I whispered.

"I was a carpenter. They needed me to make more and more barracks. Places were made for thousands."

I struggled to comprehend the full horror of what he said, to put the ghastly words into some order in my head. "But you were not in Auschwitz yesterday. You must have been in Lieberose."

Jacob nodded. I feared his head would fall from his shoulders, there was so little flesh on him. "Yes. In January the Soviet army approached Auschwitz. We expected the SS to flee and

leave us behind, but they didn't. They herded us together and drove us westwards. We marched through the winter cold. Many collapsed and were shot. I do not know how I kept going. We finally reached camp Gross-Rosen, but the SS could not rest there. The Soviets were moving deeper into German-held territory. Another death march lay ahead. The S.S. drove in cars, whipping us onward. When we came to Lieberose I lost consciousness for a while. A friend hid me below a false floor in one of the barracks. When I woke up I heard the SS shouting at us to march again, to Sachsenhausen. But I stayed hidden. I had no more strength for marching. When the SS had gone I came out of hiding and found some potato peelings. It was more than I had eaten in a week."

Jacob's body convulsed in my arms. He leaned forward and retched. The precious food spilled from his mouth. I cleaned him and carried him to a new bed of cardboard. I helped him wash out his mouth with expensive mineral water.

"I am not used to such food," he gasped.

"Perhaps you should not eat meat yet," I said. "Here. The soup is better. Do you want to come back to my camp with me? I could carry you on my bicycle."

Jacob shook his head. "Just leave me with food in my hands. I will be stronger soon."

I had lost my desire for luxury food, but I made myself fill a box with tinned meat and seafood. I tied the box to my bicycle. My hands moved automatically. The excitement had drained from me. I held a great tide of grief at bay by sheer willpower.

I am no better than Jacob is, I told myself. I had no wife and children. He should have escaped early, as I did. He and so many others. They should have shared my luck, as I left Lódz and went into hiding. They should not have died.

But of course they probably stayed because of their young children. The journey I had made could not have been made by a young child. Still, a part of me raged against the fate that had befallen so many innocents.

As I gathered up food, I nearly tripped over another skeletal body. I apologized automatically, until I saw the wide, staring eyes, the peculiar stillness of the bone woman. Her hands were full of food, but she was dead.

I looked closer, her face seemed somewhat familiar. Yes, it was Sarah! In the midst of plenty she died. Her starved body could no longer take in nourishment.

CHAPTER 27 - The Radio

I was deeply shaken by the horrors revealed by Jacob and the others in the warehouse. Their pitiable condition made his stories even more shocking. I had been spared these terrors. But the cruelty of the Nazis' actions, the scope of the disaster that had befallen my people, left me dazed. Grief threatened to break over me, to drown me in a sea of nightmares. If I let it, would I ever find my way back to shore of sanity again?

The spring sun shone in an azure sky. The day was peaceful, lovely. It jarred me. Black clouds and harrying winds would have felt better—not this pristine beauty. How could nature carry on after witnessing such abominations—the callous extermination of countless good people? It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. The universe should rebel, and cry out against so many wrongs. But only my heart cried out. My body stood frozen in reaction to these atrocities.

My barrack-mates Tom, Zbyszek, Franek, and Stasiek who had cycled to Torgau with me, came to collect me about noon.

Tom shuddered as he stepped over a wasted body. "What hideous crimes have been committed in this war?" he asked me, his face ashen. "But we must force ourselves to take food to the camp. It is needed there."

They had all packed as much food and drink as their bicycles could carry.

"We must get out of this charnel house," Stasiek said. "The town seems deserted. Let's

go on."

I let their eagerness pull me along—a thread of life in the face of all that threatened to overwhelm me. We had plenty of time to look around before returning to the camp.

Torgau was completely abandoned. The residents must have fled before the liberating Allied armies. Many houses had smashed windows and doors—signs they had been looted. Some doors standing ajar were a temptation, beckoning us to enter and learn more. Here normal Germans had lived, so close to slave labor camps! They must have known what was happening. And they had done nothing to stop Hitler's great crimes against humanity. What were these ordinary Germans like?

We entered the gaping door of a middle-class, well-furnished house. It spoke of a comfortable life. The contrast with our camp and the skeletons from Lieberose was disorienting.

"Look at this home and furniture! So much comfort so close to our camp," one of my group said.

"Feel this sofa. I sink into it. And the material is so soft!"

"You would never know there had been a war and hunger so close at hand."

"This shirt is so clean!"

"It smells a lot better than you!"

It all seemed unreal. My camp-mates took clothing to replace their threadbare shirts and trousers. The shirts, suits and shoes were fine. I could not blame them. We had shivered in the cold while these people, so close to us, had enjoyed warm clothes and plenty. But I was far from caring about such things. There was one thing in the home that caught my eye.

A wooden box sat opposite the sofa on a shelf in the living room. It was the color of

chestnuts, beautifully finished with rounded edges. Years had passed since I'd seen such a treasure. A radio! I drew closer. No average radio, this, but one of the best makes—a Telefunken. "My God!" I said, jolted out of my daze. The radio had short-wave. It could tune in other countries. The large radio dial had six parallel lines on its face, with numbers assigned. Each represented a different range of radio waves. There was even a "magic eye" to help the user tune in the desired station.

A window to the world! With such a treasure, a man could know the news, and not struggle in ignorance. We could, perhaps, learn how the Allies, including the Soviets, were going to handle the defeat of Germany and how the Germans themselves would react to it. Would Germany be divided? What would happen to Poland? What would happen to us? Would it be safe to venture far from the camp? The radio was the best kind of treasure—a source of information and maybe safety in these swiftly changing, chaotic times.

In Poland before the war only the rich could afford a radio. Everyone envied them. We poor folks longed for the knowledge of current events it offered. Just listening to a radio could lift a person from the misery of their small world into a meaningful and exciting life of music, lectures and news from everywhere imaginable. It could give a man the knowledge to make more intelligent decisions. Without our neighbor's radio, would we have left Lódz? Would I be alive today? Or would I have gone passively like a sheep to the slaughter, as so many had done?

This was what I wanted, out of all the abandoned finery of the house. Even after years of saving in Poland, I would find it difficult to buy such a treasure. Should I just take it? Wouldn't that be stealing? Where were the owners? Would they ever return? If I didn't take it, someone else would. After all the Germans had taken from us, the radio seemed a small compensation. I

could not turn away from such a potent resource in the struggle to survive. Not only myself, but all in the camp would benefit from it. I lifted the radio and put it on the luggage carrier of my bicycle. I could not bring myself to leave it behind, where it might be smashed or looted by someone who did not appreciate its value.

We returned to camp and were hailed like conquering heroes. We had plundered supplies and homes. I was not proud. But the food we carried lifted the specter of hunger from the camp. And a hush fell as I put the radio on a table in my barrack and plugged it in. Every man and boy surged forward to surround it, others as well as my barrack-mates.

"Well done, Miecio," Otto said, pounding my shoulder. "Can we find out what is happening in my home in the Netherlands?"

"I hope so, my friend."

As I tuned in various bands I found voices in German, English and Russian and music from the Allied forces. Using the station control I turned up a news broadcast.

"My God, are there little people in that box?" one of the country lads asked, amazed.

"How do voices come from this wooden case?" another asked.

"Miecio has brought back one of the marvels of the twentieth century," Wladek told them, speaking as he must have in the classroom years ago. "These voices and music come from distant places. They, and hundreds like them, have been transmitted through the air by waves that we cannot see, smell, taste, hear or touch."

"That is not possible," a boy said. "If there was so much in the air I would know about it." He gestured to his prominent nose. "I can smell anything!"

Everyone laughed.

Wladek shook his head and smiled. "You cannot sense radio waves. I can see why it is puzzling to you, though."

"This is not a hoax, left behind by the Germans to fool us?"

"No. They took the radio from their canteen with them. They never wanted us to hear the news from free countries. But really, that news has been broadcast through the air all through the war by these radio waves—electromagnetic waves. We cannot tell they are in the air unless a radio is here to sort them out, one station at a time, and let us hear the one we choose. So the waves did us no good until now. Some programs are as valuable as school lessons, sent by air. Others, like the music, stories and plays, can entertain us. All from one small box! This is an amazing piece of science and technology." Wladek nodded to me. "As much as I oppose stealing, I am glad you brought this radio to us, Miecio. We need to know what is happening outside the camp."

I found an English station—the BBC from London, and translated the news for the other fellows. I even found a station in Russian for the Soviet camp inmates.

"Soviet troops and troops from the United States, Britain and France have occupied all of Germany," I told them. The Russians cheered and pounded each other on the back. I listened to summaries of past and present events. "We must be surrounded on all sides by the Allies now. Germany surrendered on May 9th. Italy surrendered earlier." The Italian workers had disappeared from Vogelgesang together with the Germans. The radio told of Mussolini's capture and execution. The camp members shouted their joy.

"Be quiet for another moment," Wladek told them. "What did they just say about Hitler?"

"Apparently he might be still in a bunker in Berlin. His fate is yet unknown. Some of the German generals have been caught and arrested."

There was more news. The Allies had not yet ended the war in the East. Japan fought on, in the Pacific, despite terrible losses. But our jubilation could not be contained. Their cheers quickly drowned out the radio.

"Music!" they demanded. "The war is truly over! We must celebrate!"

The liberated foods were passed around. Bottles of wine from the German warehouse were opened and passed from hand to hand. Wladek smiled and leaned close to me. "You might as well give them what they want," he shouted in my ear. "You won't be able to hear anything for a while." I tuned in a music program and everyone began to dance. The Russians who had joined us whirled through the group, leading simple folk dances. The Russian girls danced with everyone, adding to the jubilant mood.

At first I sat out of the way, taking care of the radio. The BBC news broadcast from England, this time in German, had reassured me. The Allies had ended the war in Europe. Our long ordeal was really over. But how many of my people were left to celebrate? My parents were certainly dead; they had not lived to witness this moment. It was hard for me to shake off my earlier grief.

"Come, Miecio," one of the Russian girls shouted into my ear. "Are you ill?"

"No," I assured her.

It was Maria, from Odessa in the Ukraine. She was a warm woman of twenty, with a caring smile, dark hair and eyes, and a beautiful figure. I had spoken to her a few times during the last days of the war. In her kindness and supportiveness, she was like Ninochka, but more robust.

In physical beauty, she was like Lisa. I had avoided girls for so long, but Maria had spoken to me several times, and I could not resist her winning smile. Maria always expressed concern for my health and welfare. I was beginning to like her. As the others celebrated, she sank down beside me, her brow furrowed in concern.

"But you do not smile or dance. What is wrong?"

"So many people have suffered in the war. I cannot forget them."

She squeezed my hand. "Dear, kind Miecio. We will never forget them. They will always be enshrined in our hearts. But now the war is over. It is the time to put sorrow behind us for a while and be happy. Can you not try?"

I essayed a weak smile. It was hard to frown when Maria held my hand and smiled into my eyes. "I can try."

"Please. It is not right for you to sit brooding while we dance. We are not prisoners any more. Dance with me."

I nodded. I had no wish to spread gloom in this joyful moment. Maria pulled me into the dancing and I, too, caught the mood of glad relief, and even triumph. I could almost hear my father in my head: "Hold fast to life, Davidek. Find happiness, whatever happens to us! This is my wish, my son."

I will dance for Father, then, I thought. I will dance for Mother, and for the skeleton woman, for all those who cannot be here to dance. We who live on must learn to dance through our grief, for that is an act of hope and life in the face of all the Germans have done.

And, please grant that I will dance with Szymek soon, I thought.

Night fell. Polish, Russian and Dutch songs poured out of the camp, all in a happy

jumble. French songs, too. Every camp inmate found a way to dance on Hitler's grave. Every boy and man seemed drunk with relief, intoxicated by the confirmed news of our freedom. The long nightmare had passed. I had been given the gift of life when so many had not survived. What would I do with it?

We all fell into our bunks late that night, exhausted by the celebration. Wladek, too, took off the air of the teacher, and danced for joy. "We have won," he said to me, pounding my back. "Thank God!"

We had won. Now life could return to normal. I drifted toward sleep that night, in spite of the singers who carried on the celebration. In my bunk I let go of my constant state of fear. I thought, "Everything will be simple, now. We will go home. We will rebuild our lives. I have no more worries. The Americans and the Russians will see to that. I am in safe hands at last."

I slept on my back, with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER 28 - The Bitter Feast

Every day I woke up and breathed in my liberation. The air was fresh and sweet, with the perfumes of spring flowers. I ate the bread of freedom. Even when the bread was stale and coarse, it tasted good. Every day was a celebration, as the camp workers mingled and devised games to play with their leisure hours. We played outdoors like innocent children, watching the bursting buds of spring, while we waited for the liberating army to reach us. We threw stones at a target on the ground, trying to hit it. We jumped over a thin piece of wood that was set higher and higher. The exercise felt wonderful. We ate ravenously. At night we shared the drinks taken from the German warehouses.

In the evenings the Russians taught us their dances of joy. We shared Polish folk dances, and I was impressed with the knowledge of the country lads. I myself had no dances to share. When Maria took my hand, her face shining with happiness, I stumbled along as best I could. There was a lot of laughter, and some tripping over our own feet. Mistakes were easily forgiven.

"I'm sorry," I said, as I missed a step and threw Maria off.

"Don't worry," she laughed. "I like dancing with you anyway."

"How can you? I do it so badly."

"But you are so polite about your mistakes. And you try so hard. You are better than you think."

"You are being too kind. I am as awkward as a newborn heifer."

She laughed again. "And you make me laugh. That is best! For so long we couldn't remember how to laugh."

"Now we are getting closer to the truth. I am a clown!"

She giggled and threw her arms around me in a quick hug. The feel of her young body next to mine made me blush. I wondered what would happen if we were alone.

Too tired to dance any more, we collapsed on some benches that had been rigged around the barracks.

"What will you do now?" Maria asked me, as we watched some Russian men demonstrate the Cossack dance.

"I won't try that dance, for certain," I said, panting.

She slapped my shoulder playfully. "That's not what I meant. I mean where will you go?"

"Home, I suppose. Back to Poland. And you?"

"Back in Odessa I will be able to finish my education. I was studying engineering."

"That sounds like a good plan."

She nodded. "I suppose so. But I will miss you and the other friends I have made here. Life has too many good-byes."

"Far too many," I agreed soberly. I took her hand, and held it gently. She did not pull away.

She frowned. "Now you must dance with me again, because you have made me sad. It is your job to make me laugh again."

She tugged me to my feet. I soon stumbled again, and she laughed. When we parted, late

that night, she kissed me quickly on the lips. "Sleep well."

"I will dream of you, Maria. And that is your fault." I pretended outrage.

She giggled. "How terrible! I will have to find a way to make that up to you."

With that teasing remark she joined some other Russian girls wandering toward their barrack.

I almost tripped over Tom on my way back to my own barrack. "She is very pretty," Tom said, grinning at me.

"Were you spying on me?"

"No. I walked some of the girls home. There is as much privacy in this camp as in a privy."

"I noticed," I groaned. "I could use a holiday from the crowds."

"Then take one," Tom said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there are hundreds of empty houses in Torgau. Remember? Who would care if you went to stay in one for a few days?"

I blinked. "No one," I admitted. "But Maria would never—"

Tom laughed. "By the way she hangs on your arm, I think she would."

"I wouldn't know what to do," I said, glad the darkness hid my blush. "I've never even dated a girl, never had a real kiss."

"The girls haven't either. We have all lost our youth to the war. A lot of us want to make up for lost time, now."

"Would you want to come, Tom?"

Tom laughed again. "No. I'm far too shy. I will be a virgin until I'm forty."

I nudged him. "I bet you won't."

"I think Franek and Stasiek would go with you, though. They have girlfriends. And maybe Zbyszek. He has been hanging around with a Russian girl taller than him."

"I can't believe you are suggesting this," I told Tom. "We are all probably still virgins, including the girls."

He put up his hands. "I'm not suggesting anything. Who am I? A mouse who talks to all the girls and wouldn't dare dance with one."

I mussed his hair. "It's the quiet ones you have to watch," I said.

Once the idea had been voiced, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I shared it with my cycling group and they were all enthusiastic. Our supplies from the warehouses were nearly gone. They had planned another trip to Torgau anyway. We resolved to ask the girls the next day if they wanted to come. But we would be honest about wanting to stay overnight in town. Tom had already offered his bicycle for one of the girls to use.

"We won't be able to get enough bicycles," Stasiek said. He was always the first to voice doubts.

"Maybe you're right. If we can't, then the holiday is off, and some of us will just go for supplies, as before," Franek said.

"Yes. Let's not get too excited yet," I said. "It's just an idea so far."

Good words, but I could hardly sleep that night. My imagination wouldn't stop tormenting me. I tossed and turned, too excited and nervous to fall asleep until near dawn. I had just fallen into a deep sleep when someone shook me by the shoulder. The old fear rose up and I

nearly screamed. Then I saw it was Franek, a silly grin pasted on his plain face.

"We have enough bicycles," he said.

"Who's going to ask the girls?" Stasiek asked. His rumpled hair was sticking straight up and he was biting his lip.

"Not you!" Zbyszek laughed. "You look like a child caught stealing Christmas cake!"

"Well, you don't look much better. Your socks don't match. And your shirt isn't tucked in."

"We'll all ask our own girlfriends," I said, fully awake now. "And we'd better ask them privately, so we don't embarrass them."

"You mean so we don't get embarrassed when they turn us down," Franek said.

"That, too," I admitted.

Frenzied washing and grooming followed. My few clothes were rumpled and worn. I did my best, in spite of that.

Zbyszek inspected me, and I him. "Not bad," we decided.

"As good as we can look without new clothes."

"We should have stolen new shirts in town, instead of food," Franek said as he inspected his torn shirt.

"They won't care if they really want to come," Zbyszek said.

"We'd better have breakfast first. Fainting of hunger won't impress anyone," Franek said.

We grabbed some bread and the last of the cheese. Trying to look casual, we strolled toward the Russian barracks.

Tom saw us and grinned. "Good luck," he waved us on.

Franek frowned at me. "Does everybody know about this?"

"No. Just Tom. It was his idea," I explained.

"Oh." He waved back at Tom. "If this works, I'll get him a bottle of champagne."

We found the girls coming out of the Russian canteen. It was strange the way each nationality usually ate together, even when we didn't have to. We separated and greeted the girls. They flashed questioning looks at us.

"What's up?" Maria asked me.

"We're going to Torgau to get more supplies. Would you like to come?"

Maria's face lit up. "Yes. I'd love to see the town. But I don't have a bicycle. Do you have an extra one?"

"Yes, but wait. There's something else. We wanted to go to a house and stay there for a few days. To take a holiday from the camp, sort of. Do you still want to come?"

I didn't have the nerve to look her in the eye as I asked the last part. When I glanced up she was exchanging glances with the other girls. They were smiling. I dared to look at Maria's face. If I was going to be rejected, I might as well take it like a man.

"Yes, Miecio," Maria said softly. "I would like to come, but only if my friends come along too."

The smiles of the other girls erupted into laughter as they said: "*Harasho!*"—"Okay!"

I blushed, but I didn't care any more. "That's terrific! Have you eaten yet?"

Maria nodded and smiled wider. "I haven't ridden a bicycle for years, but they say you never forget. I hope I don't fall and flatten my nose." She wrinkled her nose.

"Even if your nose were flat, it would still be a p-pretty nose," I stammered. I realized she

was joking to break the tension, and warm feelings rose in me. Maria was kind and gentle. I would not push her into anything. But I would be very glad if she were my first.

Everyone agreed. And everyone looked nervous as well as pleased. None of us is experienced, I thought. Well, then we would all be embarrassed with each other. It could be much worse.

We gathered up our bicycles and set off—four boys and four girls. A few hoots and shouts followed us onto the road.

"They're just jealous because they didn't think of it first," Maria told me.

She found her balance on the bicycle at once. I watched her carefully, but she needed no help. She raced ahead a little, her spirits high. The spring sunshine was warm on our faces. None of us had enough wind to talk much on the way.

Torgau was still like a ghost town. At the warehouses, Maria was astonished. "Strawberry jam! And Camembert cheese in tins! You never brought any of this back before."

"We didn't have a woman's discerning eye to find the treasures," Franek said.

"Everything looks so good. How did you choose?"

"We just grabbed the first armload that looked good," Stasiek admitted.

We found there was still plenty of good food to choose from. After filling the boxes on our bicycles, we went on.

Touring Torgau, we picked a large empty house which turned out to be well furnished. We piled our plunder onto the kitchen counters. Franek inspected the upstairs briefly and came down with a mysterious smile on his face. "There are four bedrooms," he told Stasiek and me quietly, "just enough for the eight of us."

"Look!" Zbyszek called from the elegant living room. "There's a gramophone and records!"

We clustered around, amazed by our good fortune. "Put on this one," Zbyszek asked. "No, no. This one!"

Popular music filled the air. It was a relief after too much silence on the empty streets. And dancing relieved our pent-up feelings. I don't know what I felt most—joyful anticipation or plain nervousness. The girls seemed to feel the same. As Maria touched me during the dancing, I tingled. We were all out of breath by the time the girls disappeared into the kitchen to prepare dinner.

"No peeking!" they made us promise. "You set the table."

There was a separate dining room with a large table and plenty of chairs. We found fine china in a cabinet and set the table for eight. Exotic smells already drifted to our noses from the kitchen.

"What smells so good?" Franek called.

Maria stuck her head out the door with a pert smile. "That's for us to know and you to guess!" she said. "It will be worth the wait."

"I will die of hunger before it's ready!" Franek groaned, joking.

We were all giddy. The table shone. We opened our wine and filled long-stem glasses. Darkness fell. There was still electricity, so we turned on all the lights. At last the girls carried in platters full of steaming crab stew and candied vegetables. We applauded the cooks, and they bowed, blushing. Then we sat down to begin our feast.

"To freedom!" Franek said, raising his glass in a toast.

"To friendship!" Maria replied. "So we can enjoy our freedom!"

We clinked glasses and drank. Our eyes were bright.

"This food is beautiful, but the cooks are even lovelier," Stasiek said, his face red.

His hair was sticking straight up again. I had begun to realize that was its natural direction. None of us cared. We boys cheered his words and drank again.

Suddenly hard knocks sounded on the door. Our smiles died on our faces. Before we could get up to answer it, five heavily armed soldiers burst through. They were Americans—big men—two black and three white. They pointed their rifles at us and shouted. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Where is your identification? All Torgau is in darkness! Why is this house shining so brightly?"

Stunned, I sorted so many words out of their shouts. Grateful I knew enough English to cope, I answered for us.

"We are your allies—Poles and Russians. We spent the war in a labor camp not far from here. We are visiting Torgau."

I stammered on, explaining how we had been hungry for so long. How we had paid for the food we ate over and over with our labor. I told my friends, "It's all right. They are Americans. We have nothing to fear."

But they weren't listening to me. Something was wrong. One of them grinned and spoke to the next soldier. His rapid speech was in an accent unfamiliar to me. I could not catch his words. They laughed. There was more quick talk. I could not understand any of it. I kept talking, but they were not listening. With their rifles they motioned the boys into a side room. A door slammed in our faces. We tried to push it open. A soldier outside forced us back in with the

barrel of his rifle, and locked the door. The harsh tone of his orders made his meaning clear, even when I couldn't catch his words. We would be quiet, or suffer the consequences.

"What are you doing?" I cried in English. "Let us go!"

I might have been shouting to the walls. There was no answer. We heard footsteps on the staircase.

"No!" Zbyszek said, as comprehension dawned on his face. "No! They are our allies!"

Franek held his head in his hands. "This can't be happening!"

"Miecio! Why is this happening?"

Muffled sounds came from the bedrooms above us. I suddenly understood, and doubled up with the pain of the knowledge.

"The soldiers have been without women for too long. They lack the discipline to resist..." I could not get any more words past the bitter constriction in my chest. My legs seemed made of rubber. I pounded on the door, and managed to open it. The soldier outside pushed me back with a curse. I was no match for a heavily armed soldier. Another took his place, and he smiled as he turned to the stairs.

"You have no right! These might have been your sisters!" I shouted.

"I thought we were safe now!" Stasiek said bitterly. "Is this peace?"

I longed to stand between Maria and this cruel treatment. But I could do nothing to help her. I swore aloud at our helplessness. The phantoms of the past flashed before my eyes—Hanna and her shy request; Ninochka's smiles; Lisa's terrified retreat. Every time I came close to a woman's love, violence and cruelty cut me off from joy. Worse still was Maria's suffering. She and the other girls had come here for tenderness and warmth—a gentle awakening to the joys of

love. Now their young innocence was being crushed.

"They are beasts, these Americans!" Zbyszek cried. "They are no better than Nazis!"

I was shaking with anger, but I said, "The Nazis would have killed us all."

"Decent men would have left us in peace. You cannot defend them!"

"I'm not defending them. I'm being realistic. If only we hadn't switched on the lights. We attracted their attention. Without the lights they might never have noticed us."

Franek groaned. "We brought the patrol to our doorstep. This is all our fault!"

"You are not putting the blame where it belongs. I will hate those beasts forever!" Zbyszek said harshly. "We must fight them!"

"With what? Curses against bullets? We haven't got a chance against these soldiers."

"They can't kill us. We are their allies."

Franek shook his head. "Do you think anyone will notice or care if they shoot us all, and walk into the night? There are too many corpses already—more than can be counted. Do you think anyone will bother with a few young Polish and Russian bodies? No one would even know our names or who we are."

"Arrgghh!" Stasiek cried aloud the anguish we all felt. There was nothing we could do to help the girls but shout our outrage until our throats were hoarse, and hope that shame stayed the soldiers' hands.

They had no shame. Two hours passed while we raged at them. At last they came downstairs, unlocked the door, and left the house. They walked to the sidewalk joking with each other, without giving us a second look. We called out to the girls. We ran up the stairs. They were alive.

"Leave us alone!" Maria said, slamming a door in our faces. "Go away!"

Were they too embarrassed to face us? Or did they despise us for failing to protect them? We never knew. From then on, they avoided us. The next morning they took four of the bicycles and returned to the camp without saying good-bye. No words of regret or forgiveness were spoken. The girls avoided us completely. The war had inflicted another wound. I hoped that Maria would forgive me and heal in time. I never saw her again.

It took a long time for me to soften my hatred of the American soldiers who raped Maria and the other girls that night in Torgau. My father said war made men insane. I finally realized even those soldiers might have been decent men before the war. They had become hardened by war, by killing other men and watching their friends bleed and die beside them. Perhaps for years they had seen nothing but pain and death, all to liberate countries a whole ocean away from their own. I knew many American lives had been sacrificed in the struggle to free Europe from the Nazis. They had suffered terrible losses in other parts of the world, too. They had come to Germany late in the war, but after bitter battles. This could never excuse their actions that night, but it might begin to explain them. They might never have abused young women under normal conditions. Better to hate the war than to hate the soldiers. And of course, other American soldiers might have behaved quite differently.

CHAPTER 29 - Farewell Fraulein Dichter

My heart was heavy as we returned to camp. I had suggested the outing to Torgau, and now four young women had suffered because of it. Because I wanted to find romance! Maria and the others would need a lot of healing, after the way the soldiers had used them. And our experience of helplessness had crushed the spirits of every young man with me—all of us! The glamour of liberation had gone. Bitterness remained. The legacy of hate from the war continued to take its toll.

"What is the use of peace if acts of violence continue?" I asked Wladek. Needing to confide in someone, I had told him of the ghastly end of our outing, with tears of shame. "Nothing makes sense!"

Wladek and I found a solitary corner in the compound. "Peace does not come of itself when war ends," he said. "Good men have to build it again. When the authorities hear of these barbaric acts, they will put a stop to them. Right now, war-weary men have guns and the sickness in their hearts to misuse their power. It is as your father said—war is a madness. It has spread years of hate, suffering and grief. Such things will take time to pass."

He put a hand on my shoulder. "You must not blame yourself for what happened. You believed you were safe. How could you know that our Allies would do such a thing?"

"I should have known not to turn on the lights!" I berated myself.

"Yes, that was a mistake. But an honest one. You were naive, perhaps, but the soldiers were brutal. Luckily, everyone survived. In time they will heal. Let yourself heal, too."

"I will never forget what happened," I said.

"My friend, we all make mistakes. Not all men are as good as you would believe. Now all of Europe is in chaos—a dangerous time between war and peace. It is better to be invisible during such times. You will survive this as you survived all the sufferings of this war. But be cautious. And allow yourself and everyone else to be human."

The new flowers of spring no longer made me glad. Tom could not forgive himself, either, for suggesting the outing to me.

"My dear friend, you only thought of it. I did it. Should I blame myself forever?"

"N-no. You meant no harm," Tom said.

"Neither did you," I told him.

Back in the camp it took all of us days to recover from the wounds of that night in Torgau. Soon other painful injustices commanded our attention and pushed them into the background.

Tom told us that a group of angry drunk fellows from various barracks had gone out seeking their own revenge that night. They combed the area around the camp, searching for Germans, and started a squabble with some German men. At first it seemed a minor fight, but it gradually grew more violent. By the end of it, three Germans had been killed. Among them, sadly, was the painting foreman Bruno, who had lived in nearby Elsnig.

Tom's account hit me like a punch in the stomach. Of all the Germans I had met, Bruno was the one I liked the most. He had been a generous, decent man, in no way deserving of this cruel fate. I remembered drawing the portrait of his dead son. He had already lost so much. And now he had lost his life. My body rebelled against news of my camp-mates behaving so brutally.

"What is the use of peace if this can still happen?" Tom asked.

"I don't know." I choked on the words. What was the use indeed? Good men still died, while other men used violence against them. The victims of German mistreatment wanted revenge. But innocent civilians were being hurt instead of the SS who had done the harm.

"Where is God's justice?" Tom wondered angrily.

"I have no answer for you, Tom."

A few days later a truck full of Soviet soldiers pulled in at the gate. Holding their rifles ready, they spilled from the vehicle and surrounded the camp. Many of us gathered to welcome the liberators.

"Who are you men?" the Commanding Officer asked in Russian.

One of the men in the crowd, a Russian worker, came forward with a smile.

"Comrade! We welcome you! We have been prisoners in this German work camp for years. There are many men and some women from other countries in this camp, too. We wish to embrace you, our liberators!"

The officer's face hardened. "You, a Soviet, have worked for the Germans? What work?"

"W-we were forced to make munitions. "

"Traitor!" the officer barked. "It was your duty to resist the enemy, even to the death, rather than help them kill your countrymen."

This much I overheard. A string of orders followed, snapped out in Russian, too quickly for me to understand. The soldiers fanned out through the camp looking for other Soviet men.

"All Russians and Ukrainians assemble! Fall into line! *NOW!*"

The man who had welcomed the soldiers stood by. All color had drained from his face. "We resisted," he said. "We had no weapons. W-we had no choice."

There were more questions. As the Russian men and women lined up, interrogations were held on the spot. I saw Ivan in one of the lines, his face beet red. I noticed he had abandoned his violin. The rest of us stood back, suddenly frightened. What travesty of justice was this?

The officer was interrogator, judge and jury. More trucks arrived. All the Russian men were loaded into the trucks and taken away. The officer smiled and said, "Off you go to Siberia! You will regret your collaboration with the enemy for a long time!"

There was no chance to speak to any of them. I longed to shout at Ivan, "Escape this unjust punishment now, before it is too late! You will never see warm Italy unless you run away now!"

Ivan could have hidden himself instead of coming obediently to the officer's call. But the Russians had learned obedience from birth. They lined up for their punishment, stepped into the trucks and headed for an uncertain future, without speaking a word of protest.

Where is God's justice? I asked myself.

The women were spared. The officer saw their yellow faces, poisoned by the sulfur. He must have been told of those who had been killed in the explosion. Perhaps that moved him to pity. Perhaps it was easier to admit that the women were forced to labor for the Germans.

The departing officer promised to send soldiers to administer the camp as soon as he could spare them—in a week at most. "Keep order, or you will face the consequences," he told us.

I have been living in a bubble of false hopes and dreams, I told myself sternly. The ordeal is not over yet.

We were deeply shocked by the fate of our Russian friends. "What will happen to us?"

boys asked themselves all over the camp.

"Will they harm the rest of us?" Tom asked Wladek.

"I don't think so. But they are hardened soldiers. They will have to enforce order."

There were no celebrations that night. We heard the Russian women weeping.

More Russian soldiers arrived later that week, but they were friendly and lenient with us. They seemed to bear no grudge. Anyone who wanted to leave the camp was allowed to walk out without formality. Some of the men began to depart for their home countries. I watched days go by, paralyzed by uncertainty. One day Tom sought me out.

"Otto is looking for you."

Putting aside my inner battles, I found my Dutch friend packing his things. He embraced me warmly.

"Good Miecio! I am so glad you have come. It would have broken my heart to leave without saying good-bye to you."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Home to Holland. I will have to cross the lines between the Soviet and American armies. They seem to have divided up Torgau into zones to occupy and patrol. The line is not firmly drawn, yet. It may still be easy to pass through the town. It is a good time to leave."

I nodded.

"My feet have grown hungry for the feel of my own country's soil beneath them." Otto smiled. "Have you decided what to do yet?"

"Not yet. Maybe I should go back to Poland. But Otto, the streets are not safe yet, you know. Even with our Allies around." I had not told him of my experience with the girls and the

American soldiers.

Otto grinned and pointed to his pack—as ragged a collection of patches as I had ever seen. His clothes, too, were very worn and poor. "The secret is to look as if you have nothing worth stealing. My chess set and money are buried inside smelly underwear. No soldier would get past the smell to see what is inside. No one will think I am a rich man—so they will leave me alone. They will look somewhere else for wealth."

In spite of myself I laughed with Otto. His humor was hard to resist. And he had brought such steadfast comradeship to my life.

"I will miss you terribly," I told him. "You and your ridiculous laugh. And I will remember to try to keep the mirror of my mind clean. I am still easily fooled."

"Ah," Otto said sympathetically, "then you are really growing up. Boys think they know the truth. Adults should realize and accept that they make mistakes. It is so hard to see clearly and to be aware of our own ignorance." He embraced me again. "I will miss you too, my friend. In all of this camp, you have as true a heart as any man. And a good mind! Don't waste them. Good luck."

There was affection in his eyes. Soon he strode away, out of the gates of Vogelgesang. Two other Dutch men went with him. They all looked poor, following Otto's example. I felt lost as my friends disappeared, one by one.

My thoughts turned to Fraulein Dichter. I knew she lived in a village just beyond the near-by forest. I might be able to see her. I had an idea which house was hers. For two years we had worked within a few steps of each other, yet we had kept our distance. When she might have come closer, I had pushed her away. There would be no questions of "racial defilement" any

more. What would happen if we saw each other, now that there were no Nazi rules to keep us apart? Would we feel mutual attraction? I became curious. I felt no affection for her, but I had dreamed of holding her in my arms, and quashed my desires so many times. Why not give them a chance, and see what happened?

I found her home easily. Fraulein Dichter lived with her mother in a small house at the edge of the village. To get there I crossed over a new sewer trunk line which was under construction. Huge empty pipes lay above ground, once intended to connect the factories in the forest with the water mains in Elsnig. I felt a moment's doubt as I knocked on the door. Was this folly? What would I say to the girl? I would stammer and look ridiculous. I had almost made up my mind to leave when a middle-aged woman opened the door.

"*Bitte?*" she asked, with an enquiring look.

"I am from Camp Vogelgesang," I began."*Ich habe mit ihrer Tochter gearbeited*"— "I worked with your daughter."

Fraulein Dichter appeared beside her. "I heard a familiar voice, but I thought I must be imagining it," she said smiling. "I am pleased to see you again. I thought you must have left Germany by now."

"Not yet," I said.

"I'm glad." Her smile was warm. "Mama, this is Herr Wośko, the young draftsman who worked with me in the forest. We are old friends."

"Ah! Come in, please. Let me get you a glass of tea. It is good to see friends in such times."

"Thank you."

I need not have worried about what to say. Fraulein Dichter did all the talking.

"How I hated our boss, Herr Muller," she said. "He was a snake, like all Nazis! We had to be polite to them, just to survive, but we hated every minute of it."

"My child—" her mother interrupted.

"No, really. He watched over us like a snake, never kind, never generous. He was so demanding! And he fed the fire as if every stick of wood was a bar of gold."

I had to smile. "I never knew you felt that way."

"And how did you feel?"

"The same."

She laughed. "There we were, for two years, feeling the same way and never saying a word about it. Like little mice! My God, but I'm glad that's over!"

She rattled on about every person who had come to the office. "How they put on airs! As if their company owned the world!"

I sipped my tea and listened, amazed. Who would have thought such an animated, pert girl was buried behind Fraulein Dichter's facade? I liked her better, as her natural spirits showed through. I suggested that we call each other by our first names. "I am Miecio," I said. With a smile and a slight blush of the cheeks, she responded, "Gertrude."

The house was poor but neat. The furniture was not grand, but it radiated a sense of comfort. The living room smelled of beeswax. Someone had recently polished the wooden armrests on the small couch and chair. Only in museums had I smelled so much wood preservative. I began to feel restless under the gaze of her mother.

"It is a pleasant afternoon. Perhaps you would like to go for a walk?" I asked Gertrude

awkwardly.

"Oh, yes. That would be nice, Miecio," she replied with a timid smile.

We left quickly, and walked a well-worn path beside the border of the forest. The scent of clover filled the air. June had arrived, in all its splendor. The fields and hedgerows were in full bloom. The trees overhead had just unfurled their leaves. Each tree was tinted a different green—fresh and new. A boy and a girl walking in the countryside—what could be more natural? I tingled with anticipation.

"It's a new beginning. Don't you feel it?" Gertrude asked me.

I nodded. "When we were working together, all that time, did you ever wonder—"

She laughed loudly. "Many times!" She flashed me a teasing look out of the corner of her eye. "There is no one to stop us now." I was taken off-guard by her forwardness.

"No. Do you want to try?"

For an answer she gave my lips a light, experimental kiss. "It's too bad! We are in the open, all the world can see us."

"Not if we climbed inside those new pipes, they wouldn't," I ventured.

She looked back. Her home was out of sight. "Inside the pipes?"

"Yes. It is clean, dry and roomy, and very private."

More than a meter in diameter and about eight meters long, the pipes would provide complete privacy and reasonable comfort. I climbed into one and held out my hand. Giggling, Gertrude joined me. She slipped into my arms easily. Spurred more by curiosity than affection, we embraced. It didn't take long. I was awkward and too excited. "So that's what all the talk is about," I thought. I had been waiting so long that the act itself did not live up to my expectations,

maybe because we bore no love for one another. But now I was a man. At last I had gained the long imagined first experience. Soon we crawled out of the pipe and traversed the same path back to her home.

When I returned to the camp Tom asked me to help cook for the Polish barracks. As we cooked I told him of my new experience.

"Was it the way you expected?"

"Not really. I guess there must be a difference if you're in love with each other." I hesitated. "It was good to find out what it's all about, though."

The following afternoon I went back to see Fraulein Dichter, but the sight of a Soviet army truck parked by the house made me pause. Once in view of the soldiers, I could hardly turn around and retreat, so I went into the house. A soldier stood guard beside the closed bedroom door. He grinned at me.

"Two of my friends are having fun with the mother and daughter, comrade. Do you want the same? You'll have to line up." He grinned, pointing his rifle towards the door.

"N-no!" I stammered. "*Spasiba,*"—"Thank you," I said in Russian. My belly had turned to lead. I smothered a curse and turned away.

As I walked back to the loneliness of my bunk, I berated myself, dashing away tears of anger. What was the use of being a man? Again, soldiers with guns stood between me and a woman. Again, I was forced to walk away from a sordid and violent scene, helpless to assist the women being abused.

During the next weeks, I learned that few German women escaped rape by Soviet soldiers.

CHAPTER 30 - Departures

I dreamed of Szymek, wasted by hunger, and awoke shaking. "Szymek, my friend! Where are you? Please be alive! I must find you!" I sent the words into the night, fired by an inconsolable pain in my heart.

It was time to go home. Home! Where *was* my home? The Jewish homes in Lódz had been pillaged and taken by Christian Poles. Ours was certainly gone. The building might not even be standing any more. I could not be certain where my parents had died, but I was sure they had perished. Even healthy young men lasted no more than three months in the camps before they weakened past the point of usefulness, to be shot or gassed to death. Old and weak, my parents probably had never lived to see a camp. Likely they had been shot when the Germans cleared the Krasnik ghetto the day I escaped, or shortly after. They had no skills to barter for their lives, as Jacob had done, surviving as a carpenter. My parents might have been the elderly Jews murdered in Richard's tale. Would I ever know my parents' true fate? I did not even have a grave to visit. My few other relatives, like my grandmother, had died before the war.

Without my family, where was my home? With Szymek, my closest friend. But if he was still alive, he could be anywhere. I refused to allow myself to think Szymek dead. He was too resourceful and strong for that. He must have used his skills to live through the nightmare, like Jacob. But where would the Germans have sent him? There was no way to know. The task of finding him would have to wait until the post-war chaos settled.

Without a physical home, family or friends, I was still a Pole. But my homeland had spit

me out, rejected me. I learned that Poland was under communist rule. That might change things. Perhaps education would be free to all, and I could complete what the war had interrupted—my schooling. Perhaps I could even go to university free of prejudice as well as fees. Everyone was supposed to be equal under the Communist system. Would the Christian Poles who had burned synagogues and beaten Jews on the streets welcome me now?

Stories of looting and abuse filled the news. The war might be over, but could I find real freedom—the freedom to be myself—without fear? I had seen what could happen in this precarious "peace." Was a Jew really safe now? Could people turn from hatred to tolerance or acceptance overnight? Even before the war there had been pogroms and discrimination against Jewish citizens. When and where would real safety exist? Not here in Germany. I continued to hide my Jewish origin from my camp-mates.

Soviet troops had taken over the camp, and made it their administrative center. They advised camp inmates to stay put until the roads were clear of military forces.

"For how long?" Wladek asked them.

The official shrugged. "It will take weeks before the period of reorganization is complete."

"How many weeks?"

"Who knows? These things take time."

Wladek reported this answer to our barrack, where the Polish farm lads were eager to go home. They had every hope of finding their homes intact.

"Are we free men, or still prisoners?" Wojtek said angrily.

"These Soviets just replace the Germans. We are still captives," Franek said.

"No," Wladek said. "They will not stop us if we want to go."

"Then I say we should go, and the sooner the better," Wojtek said.

Many agreed.

"And if you meet an armed patrol?" Wladek asked.

"We are doing nothing wrong. Why should they stop us? Are we men or frightened children?"

This question raised the volume of the discussion.

"We are men. We have rights!"

"We will not let anyone control us!"

It was as if all the pent-up anger of the war years came boiling to the surface.

"Wise men weigh the dangers before acting!" Wladek said loudly

But even he could not contain the indignation of the barrack. He frowned. I could see that he was torn between staying and going himself. We were sick of confinement, and it was increasingly difficult to find food for everyone.

"I admit I have no desire to wait so long to go home," Wladek told me. He raised his voice. "We *are* free men. If we travel back to Poland as a group, we should be safe enough."

The decision was made. If I had chosen for myself, I'm not sure I would have left. But I wanted to travel with my friends, like Wladek, before our ways parted. Being in a group would add safety, I hoped.

"How will we travel, though?" Zbyszek asked.

"Yes. It's a long journey."

"We cannot walk the whole way. It would take months."

"The Soviets are not going to lend us a truck. That's for sure."

"Even if we found an abandoned truck in Torgau, how would we get enough gasoline? Only the military are getting fuel."

Wladek shook his head. "Any working truck or car has already been requisitioned by the army."

"We need a wagon and horses, then. Where will we get them?"

"Some local farmers have them. But how will we pay for them? The Reich marks are useless now."

"Why should we pay? We have been working for practically nothing for Germany these many years!"

"There is no choice," Wladek admitted. "We will have to approach a farmer and ask."

Three tall fellows volunteered to canvas the area for a wagon and horses. The first farmer they asked agreed willingly to give us a wagon and two horses. "I hated Hitler," he assured them.

"Take two of my horses with goodwill. Water them sparingly when they are working. They should be fed and rested regularly." Later I wondered if he really gave us the wagon and horses with goodwill, or out of fear for his life. Many Germans had died defending their property from looters since the war. Otto used to say that during a war robbery was called *requisitioning*. The Germans had pillaged every country they conquered using this word. Victors had always done so, from ancient times.

We were the victors now. Were we any better than the Germans, taking the wagon and horses from the conquered? He is paying the price now for cooperating with the Nazis, I told myself. I squashed my doubts. Without the wagon we could not get home. Need must justify

actions.

Our group began to plan our return to Poland. There was little for me to pack except my cherished radio and my bicycle—both acquired from Germans who had abandoned them. Some of my camp-mates rigged the wagon up with extra benches for us to sit on. We were soon ready. Tom drew me aside while the others packed.

"Lisa and her roommates are getting ready to go back to Poland, too," he told me.

Lisa—the first love of my life. Even our first date had been lost to the war. The accusation that I was a Jew had terrified her. We had both kept our distance ever since. I could renew our friendship now—the friendship that had never blossomed. But the thought of seeing her brought no warmth to my heart.

Tom grinned at me. "Well, what are you waiting for? Nothing stands between the two of you now. I know how you dreamed of her, and risked death to see her. Go to her now."

"I-I don't feel that any more." I searched my heart, confused and somehow ashamed. What had happened to my feelings, once so strong? I had chanced exposure, just to hold her in my arms, to kiss her inviting lips. Where affection had burned bright in my heart, there was nothing left.

"What?" Tom said. "You were in love with her. I know you were. Such feelings don't just disappear!"

"They have. Maybe because I was almost denounced and captured by the SS for her. I don't understand it." Had the war taken away all my capacity to feel tenderness? Had the sad experiences with Ninochka and Maria destroyed my heart, made me a man of stone? I stood there confused and a little afraid. What kind of a monster had years of hiding in fear made me?

Tom put his hand on my shoulder and shook his head in sympathy. "I guess I never knew how hard you took it—her not showing up like that—standing you up."

"Maybe." I wondered if she, too, hated Jews. But I knew our botched romance was not her fault.

Tom ducked his head shyly. "I'm still your friend, aren't I?"

I embraced him. "You will always be my friend, Tom."

His firm embrace helped ease the hollow feeling inside me. I remembered the emptiness of Jacob's eyes. He had been through experiences a thousand times worse than mine. The Germans had robbed all Jews of more than material possessions and health. Even the survivors had lost something of their spirit, impossible to define. Would I ever love again? I asked myself. Or would the war live on in my poverty of heart?

So I avoided Lisa. To my surprise, on one warm, glowing spring day, beneath a crystal blue sky, she came up behind me and touched my shoulder lightly.

She smiled. "Now there is nothing in the way of our friendship, Miecio. I am planning to leave tomorrow. Maybe we can return to Poland together."

So she didn't hate Jews. Her eyes were bright and a little shy. She was offering more than the friendship of the road. I could see that. My heart did not leap, though.

"Well," I said coldly, "I made plans to go with my barrack-mates already. Sorry. I wish you a good trip."

Why couldn't I find a kind word to say to her, my first love? Why couldn't I talk about what had happened when the boys denounced me? I couldn't even be polite, and ask her where she planned to travel and settle. I turned my unfeeling back on her and walked away, never to see

her again. Later I regretted my unkindness. What had happened was not her fault. But I couldn't help myself at the time. I didn't know why. And I shivered, despite the warmth of the sun.

CHAPTER 31 - East or West?

Early in the morning, I passed through the gates of Camp Vogelgesang for the last time, with the small group of fellow Poles who had decided to travel home together. In this German camp I had feared for my life, and saved my life. That morning we left it behind for good. Our liberation was complete. There ought to have been trumpets blaring, or cheers, or shouting—something to mark the event, but none of us said a word. For a moment I could scarcely breathe. The shelter from Nazis terrors lay behind me; ahead lay the unknown.

Dawn stained the horizon a musky color. The air was chill. June blossoms grew by the roadside. A heavy dew moistened the ground. I could almost hear the grass and trees growing. The scent of the horses and slight jingle of their harnesses comforted me, evoking memories of Urzedow.

We headed east on roads I did not know, the horses pulling us slowly past fields of newly sprouted grain. All was painted with the glorious new greens of early summer. The whole earth seemed to be washed clean. Our wheels raised dust, but the wind was in our faces, so it did not bother us. My fellow travelers became jolly, describing the families and villages awaiting their return. I felt a great gulf separating me from these young men—their people and homes were still intact. I was quiet. Wladek noticed my silence and put a hand briefly on my shoulder. He must have realized that I had no family and no home awaiting my return.

Halfway through the morning we heard the sound of an engine. A jeep speeded toward us and then slowed. Armed women in Russian uniforms shouted to us and motioned for us to stop.

"Who are you?" they asked in harsh Russian, their rifles leveled at us.

Automatically, my companions turned toward me. "What are they saying, Miecio? Can you translate?"

"Get them to put down the rifles, Miecio!"

I stepped forward, grateful I knew enough Russian to answer her. "We are Poles going home. We were in a German work camp for years. Now your army has freed us," I said. It didn't hurt to smile and show some admiration.

"What camp?"

"Lager Vogelgesang." I pointed behind us. "The Soviet Administration is there now."

"Oh, yes. I have heard of it."

The women spoke to each other too swiftly for me to catch their conversation. "How is it you know Russian?" one of them asked me. She was solidly built, with officer's insignia.

"Some Russians were imprisoned in the same camp. We became friends."

"Hmm. Very well. Pass."

The rifles were lowered. The patrol drove away, and we continued on. I let out a breath I had not noticed I was holding.

"Well done, Miecio," Wladek told me.

A few of the others pounded my back in thanks. Then they went back to their own stories—tales of chickens taken by foxes, of planting and harvests. If it had not been for Wladek, who included me in conversation from time to time, my loneliness would have been painful to

bear.

"I'm an old man—thirty-five years under my belt," he told me. "Do you think I'm too old to go to university?"

"No," I said, answering as my father would have done. "It's never too late to grow in knowledge. You will be the best in the class, I am sure."

Wladek laughed. "That is, if education is free now, as in other communist states. My family is poor. There was no money to give me more education beyond high school, and there will be even less money now. But if there are no fees... I'm hoping I can go farther now."

"So am I. But I have to get my *Matura* (High School Matriculation) first."

Wladek nodded. "We think alike, you and I. Once we get to Poland, where do you plan to go?"

"I will search for some clue to my parents' fate, in Urzedow. After, I will go to Lódz, where I was born, to see what has happened there. Possibly I can rebuild my life there—a new beginning. Of course, by then, I will have changed back to my true name. I guess you have suspected for some time that I am Jewish. You are the first person I have told of my true identity."

"I knew it all along," Wladek said. "But I don't judge a man on the merits of his faith. What a man is, that is what really counts. You were a special friend to me. I am happy that you have survived."

Minutes passed before I was able to speak. "My real name is David Makow," I said quietly, "but for now call me Miecio as I prefer that the others don't know. It gives me a sense of security."

Wladek nodded, understanding volumes left unspoken—my doubts about the others, the years of fear and anxiety, the uncertainty facing me now. His hand gripped my arm again. I felt his support. There was no need for him to speak it aloud.

Memories of Lódz flooded my mind, filling me with anxiety. Would there be any Jews left in Lódz at all? I doubted I would know anyone, if Szymek and his family were not there. Would Jews have equal rights with Christians in the new, post-war Poland? Prejudices against Jews had existed for centuries. Would the new government be able to bring a new spirit of tolerance to Poland? This question returned to my mind time and again. I remembered that Saturday afternoon when our games at the local park had been interrupted by screaming, and rough young men had beaten men, women and children with clubs and rifle butts. I would never forget their shouts of "You dirty Jews! You killed our God Christus."

In my heart I had to admit that I did not know what would await me in Lódz. I had not seen the city of my birth for six years. Christian Poles must have been aware of the atrocities of the ghetto, with little protest, as far as I knew. Was I going to Lódz only in the hope of finding you, Szymek, and your family? You might be somewhere else—shipped to a camp far from home. Why go to Lódz, then?

Another Russian patrol of women soldiers stopped us about noon. Again I was able to answer their questions, and they let us go on. Sometimes we saw farmers at a distance, working in the fields. The countryside seemed deserted, except for them and the military patrols. Bumping along over the ruts and potholes, we were moving on at the horses' leisurely pace, back to the country of my birth.

By mid afternoon we decided to stop for the night and looked for a place to sleep. Luck

was with us, as we pulled into a small, quiet village. A tidy farmhouse and a large barn were visible from the road. The barn would be a perfect place to sleep. We stopped and the farmer came out to meet us. The noise of our wagon carried far, in the quiet summer afternoon. He must have heard us. He was a short but strong-looking man, his hair grizzled gray. He smiled when he heard our request.

"Please, use my barn," he told us. "It feels good to be able to help some of you who suffered under the Nazis. Do you need food? Yes, of course you must. I have bread, cheese and sausages. And beer! I bet you have not tasted beer as good as mine for a long time. Come! Rest here tonight in peace, friends."

Not a single German that we met admitted to admiring the Nazis. Who had kept them in power, then? But the man's friendliness seemed sincere. He gave us enough food for twice our number and we feasted well by lantern light in the open air by the barn. The horses and wagon we pulled out of sight of the road, to the side of the barn, leaving the horses hobbled to graze.

The farmer had boasted about the quality of his beer with good reason. After a day in the sun and the dust of the road, it tasted like summer itself. Slaking our thirst on pint after pint, we felt the aches of travel disappear. The brew must have been strong, because we soon became jolly. The fellows cracked jokes, sang Polish songs—love songs and military tunes—and even danced with each other. We were on our way to our homeland. A few sentimental tears were shed, and some of the lads got dizzy from the strong beer, and fell down, laughing. I did not notice how loud our voices sounded in the quiet of the night. After giving us the provisions and lanterns, the farmer had gone to his own bed. Darkness overtook our celebration, but the beer still flowed from the cask the farmer had given us. Every joke seemed funnier than the one before.

The sound of an engine penetrated our good cheer.

"If it is more Soviet women, we will ask them to dance," Zbyszek said, winking.

His smile faded when a truck pulled into the road, and armed Soviet men poured out of it. They leveled their rifles at our heads. We forgot our jokes.

"Who are you? By whose authority are you here?" they demanded.

I stood and explained our situation in my simple Russian. I smelled vodka on the breath of the officer. Some of the soldiers swayed as they aimed their rifles at each of us in turn. We had not been the only ones celebrating. These men seemed to have drunk a sea of alcohol.

"We are Poles, your friends and allies," I said. "We have been released from a German labor camp by your army and we are on our way home. We stopped here to rest for the night."

I kept explaining, but soon they ceased to listen to me. Their attention became focused elsewhere. One of them had found the wagon. They swarmed over it, lifting away tarps and blankets to reveal its contents.

"How could you have all these goods in the wagon? No, no! They belong to us!" one after another exclaimed, as if they had misplaced just those items yesterday.

"I think you are thieves," the officer said, putting his face close to mine. I choked on his breath.

"No, no," I protested. "These few items are all we got after years of forced labor. Please. We are harming no one. Let us go in peace."

He snatched the last sausage from our feast and issued a string of orders. Even Wladek's face had gone pale.

Exclamations in Russian sounded as the soldiers unpacked the whole wagon load, and

picked over our possessions by lantern light.

"Do you want a bicycle, comrade? What about this! A radio! Ah, I am glad I dug deeply."

One of the soldiers lifted it with admiration, and carried it to the truck. One by one, everything we had of value disappeared into the truck. Only the bicycles were of no interest, as they had their own truck. Our ragged clothing they left, too.

By the time they drove away, congratulating each other on finding the goods, our wagon had been stripped almost to the bone. They sent a few shots over our heads, and then roared off into the night. We were left shaken, relieved to see them go. Stunned, we rose to examine the wagon at last. The lads let loose a string of Polish curses.

"Drunken Russian pigs!"

"Everything of worth is gone!" Zbyszek said furiously. "They had no right!"

"Those soldiers were the thieves," Franek said. "I had shovels, tools to help me start as a carpenter. Now I have nothing for my years of hard work."

"None of us has anything."

"We have our lives," Wladek said. "And we still have the wagon and horses. They had no use for the bicycles. This is a great deal to save from such men. They might have shot us all for sport."

Our subdued group bedded down in the hayloft. We extinguished the lanterns within minutes. I realized that the sound of our revelry and the lights had drawn the soldiers to us.

"Our precautions come late," Stasiek said bitterly.

I could not sleep. I had said nothing, but the loss of the radio fell on me like a blow. Never in my life had I been rich enough to buy a radio. Those who had radios before the war

were looked upon with awe and envy by the rest of us. They were worldly wise, able to access the treasures of knowledge from everywhere. If radios had been expensive before the war, they must be as precious as diamonds now, when so many factories had been destroyed. I remembered every loss the war had brought me—our flight from Lódz, leaving everything behind, including the valuable sewing machine; my escape from Urzedow, where I lost my parents and our few possessions. Chances of romance with Ninochka, Lisa, and Maria had all had been torn from me in one way or another. I had nothing and no one in my life. Now the radio, my single cherished possession, was gone too. I had not realized how that one treasure had buoyed me and given me hope. To be robbed again, in peacetime, tore the thin thread of my plans apart. My doubts about being welcome in Poland swelled into outright fear. Life was cheap, in the aftermath of the vast slaughter of war. Maybe the Soviets who were now in charge of Poland would be no better than these ruffians. Ivan had told me that Stalin had sent millions of comrades to Siberia. Communism did not guarantee justice and freedom. Change for the better might be slow.

I tried to order my thoughts in spite of my fears. What choices did I have? Borders were closing all over Europe. Lawless bands of soldiers were still on the loose. But the days of disarray would give way to tighter control. Travel would be regulated more severely as time went on. Maybe I would be unable to leave Poland, once I had crossed her border. If Poland was still full of anti-Jewish feeling, I would find no welcome there. Was I heading into a trap where discrimination awaited me? If I didn't return to Poland, what were my options? Where could I go? The Soviet-held territories seemed especially unpredictable. Soviet soldiers were angry, and bent on taking revenge for the German atrocities towards thousands of Russian prisoners of war. The sufferings of Russia had been severe. Tales of Russian soldiers looting and raping seemed

credible now, after our most recent encounter. Every road seemed shadowed with mischance and danger.

Suddenly returning to Lódz seemed a foolish gamble. When true peace had been established, I could always return, since I was by birth a Polish citizen. If I really wanted safety and freedom, only one place seemed to offer it—the West. America, England and France had always been bastions of freedom and democracy. We had learned of their struggles toward democracy and equality in our history lessons in school. There, it was said, no one cared if you were a Jew or a Christian. There religion was a free choice, and everyone was given equal opportunity. I remembered the words of the Magna Carta, the American Constitution, the rallying calls of the French Revolution—liberty, brotherhood, and equality. These ideals were my own.

As if it had been inevitable, a plan formed in my mind. We still had the bicycles. I would take one in the morning and cycle back toward the line between Soviet and American occupation forces in Germany—now at the River Mulde. I would cross to the American-held zone of Germany. Travel was likely safer there. From there I would try to make my way further west, and explore my new life there.

The next morning we arose before dawn. It was short work to pack the wagon and thank the farmer. No one seemed shocked by my decision to go in a different direction, by bicycle. No one disputed my right to the bicycle I had used since the liberation.

"Good luck," Franek said, as I tied my small bundle of clothes and blanket to my back. Wladek alone seemed affected by my departure. "I will miss you, my friend," he said warmly.

He had been my best friend and support throughout the years in the camp. He had

probably saved my life. We stood together on the road. I held my bicycle. The first colors of the rising sun appeared on the horizon.

"I do not know how to thank you for all you have done for me, Wladek," I said.

"There is nothing to thank me for. But I thank you for your companionship. Our conversations lifted my spirits more times than you can know."

I was surprised to hear I had been of help to this strong, sensible man. Such an idea had never occurred to me. I was moved. "I will never forget you," I said.

"Nor I you," he promised.

Neither of us knew how to part. Finally I embraced him warmly. "Wladek, you are going east, I am going west."

"Safe journeys to us all."

I mounted the bicycle and left, pedaling steadily back the way we had come. Once again, a chance occurrence—the theft of the radio, had changed my mind. I had chosen a path different from that of my companions. Guided by instinct or reason—I knew not which—I cycled alone across Soviet-occupied Germany, to carve out a new fate.

CHAPTER 32 - The Border

Most of the day I cycled toward the border. I had invented a new story to explain my actions. A few times armed patrols of Russian women stopped me.

"I am a German Jew from Cologne in western Germany," I told them.

For the first time in years I admitted to strangers that I was a Jew. My heart pounded as I said it.

"A Jew! How did you survive the war?" one of them asked me, suspicious.

"I worked in a labor camp. Now I am heading home to Cologne."

The woman grunted. "*Maladyet Yvreychik*," she said. "Smart little Jew!"

She let me go. Maybe I did not look worth interrogating.

The evening was approaching as I arrived at Eilenburg, a border town on the River Mulde. I found a rooming house, and asked for a bed for the night.

The bald landlord looked me up and down. I must have looked poor. "How will you pay?" I had some of the money I had been paid at the camp and offered it. "Are you joking? That might as well be toilet paper!"

"I will wash dishes or clean in return for lodging and food."

"Very well. Clean the barn, then."

"Agreed. I'll clean after supper."

"I've heard that one before! You'll clean first, then get your food."

The barn was filthy, but I knew how to shovel manure, thanks to my farm experience. After cycling all day, it felt good to stretch my muscles, even though hunger added to the weight of the shovel. After finishing, I washed up at an open trough. Then the landlord gave me a thick slice of rye bread and a boiled egg. Two lads and an old man also ate in the kitchen and talked of the local news.

"Shot him in the back, they did. The body washed downstream. Never did get to bury the poor sod."

"Some peace!"

"Who got shot?" I asked.

"A stupid traveler. He tried to cross the border by boat." Curious eyes examined me. "These Soviet soldiers shoot first and ask questions later."

"The border to the American zone is closed, then?" I asked.

Nods.

"What if someone wanted to cross," I said. "There must be a way!"

Candlelight shone on their hardened faces. They didn't reply.

I nodded my thanks, trying to hide my disappointment.

"You could try to get permission if your home is there," the old man said at last.

"You could try to fly like a bird, too," one of the lads added, laughing.

I got directions to the Soviet army headquarters, and spent a restless night wondering if I had left Wladek and come all this way for nothing. The bed had a hard straw mattress. Eventually

exhaustion conquered worry and I slept.

I made my way to the army headquarters the next morning. Eilenburg was a maze of bombed-out buildings and empty stores. Part of the town stood on the opposite bank of the river. Once there had been a bridge joining the two, but the war had left only ragged, broken abutments on the banks. There was no passage from one side of the town to the other except by boat in full view of armed patrols.

The Soviets had requisitioned the best building in town—the undamaged town hall—for their headquarters. I explained my errand to the guards, and was shown to a hard bench to wait. After an hour a soldier showed me into an office where an officer sat at an enormous desk, reading documents from piles of papers. He looked up.

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I wish to go to my home town Cologne in western Germany," I said in broken Russian. "How do I cross to the American-occupied side of the river?"

The commander heard my request politely enough. "You don't," he said bluntly. "Wait a few weeks. Repatriation committees will arrive and look after cases like yours."

He returned to his reading, dismissing me with a wave of his hand. I was escorted out.

Now what? Give up on going west? Not yet. I needed time to make a new plan. I decided to go back to Vogelgesang—the one place I knew well. Perhaps I would stay a few weeks with Fraulein Dichter and her mother. "There had to be a way." Being so close to the West and unable to cross over was too frustrating to tolerate.

I headed eastwards again. After a half-hour of cycling, thirst made me stop at the nearest farmhouse.

"*Bitte*"—"Please. Could you spare a cup of milk?" I asked the husky man who answered the door.

"For a thirsty traveler, always!" He sat me at his well-polished table and poured me a cup himself, while his wife nodded to me shyly. "You were a prisoner during the war? Your German has a strange accent."

"Yes," I told them.

"I always doubted Hitler's words."

It was cool and pleasant to sit in the clean kitchen, where the smell of freshly baked bread lingered. As I drank, a thin, stooped man came in and gave me a polite nod. He and the farmer spoke at length. The visitor was a smuggler, finalizing plans to move goods across the river to the other side of the town.

"Excuse me," I said, when there was a lull in the conversation. "I could not help overhearing you. Could you help me get across the river?"

The thin man's eyes measured me. "Yes, if you can swim. The safest time is just before dawn, about 3:30 in the morning. I have no room for a passenger in my tiny boat, but you could swim along beside me. It would be safer than swimming the whole way alone. Can you swim?"

"Yes," I assured him. "But I have not had much practice." I was not a strong swimmer. I had learned the basics in the Carpathian mountain lakes, the summer before the war. But I was willing to try. "Can you show me the place where I would have to swim in darkness? I want to see whether I can make it."

"For a price," he agreed.

"If you help me cross I will give you most of my pack, plus the bicycle."

If the river is not too wide I might risk it, I thought. It was the only chance I could see at that moment.

The smuggler took me to the riverbank. The span of water was only about sixty meters. Its surface looked unruffled by currents. But by night it would be hard to keep my bearings. It would be easy to go wrong if I got separated from the boat...

On the other side of the river we saw three American soldiers sitting in front of a tent. I waved to them, and they waved back. They seemed totally relaxed, men without a care in the world. Their tent was on free soil. I stood on Soviet-held soil. Only the river separated me and freedom! A spasm of longing passed through me, as sharp as hunger. At that moment I heard the sound of an engine. A Russian patrol in a jeep passed by. The soldiers held rifles balanced in their grip. They eyed us sharply, but did not stop.

"How often do they drive by?" I asked the smuggler.

"Every forty-five minutes."

So I had forty-five minutes before the next Soviet patrol. I estimated a ten-minute swim to the other shore. An impulse seized me. If I were going to cross, I should do it right away, before another patrol arrived. “If you ever want freedom, reach for it now,” I told myself. Dread of swimming the river in darkness spurred me on.

"I'm going to cross over," I shouted to the Americans in English. I waved and then gestured, as if swimming. They urged me on, beckoning their welcome.

"Are you insane?" the smuggler asked me.

"Probably." Nothing could have stopped me at that moment.

I stripped swiftly. Into my pants pockets I stuffed some papers and photographs—what

little I had left. Using my belt I strapped my shoes, shirt and pants to my head. I handed the smuggler my bicycle and the rest of my pack.

"Wish me luck," I said to the thin man.

He shook his head. "The insane need no luck. God looks after them."

I plunged into the river. The water chilled me to the bone. A surprisingly strong current pulled at my legs and arms. I refused to allow doubts into my mind. I would make it. I had to. In a forward crawl, I struck out for the other side, for freedom, for safety, for my future. Soon my limbs were numb and I changed to the frog kick. Eternity seemed to pass while I fought the current that whisked me downstream as I aimed for the far shore. With all my strength I kicked, as if I were kicking Hitler and his merciless generals in the face. I scooped the water in my numb hands and pushed it behind me, as if I pushed my sorrows into the past. The far shore teased me, as remote as my thwarted romances. I glanced back. I could no longer see the smuggler. The shore behind me had become distant too. I was a thing of the river, to be swallowed up or spit out, as the river wished. Stubbornly, I pushed on. Stroke and kick, stroke and kick. I lifted my nose above the water to breathe, then put my head below water and thrashed forward, holding my breath as long as possible. Suddenly something grabbed at my legs. I panicked, checked for the bottom and felt the sweet ground under my feet. I had hit a patch of weeds. The shore was close—within wading distance. The current must have swept me onto a sandbar. I raised my feet free of the weed, staggered ashore, my chest heaving, and collapsed on a patch of grass, spent. I was far downstream from the Americans, but I had made it across the river. Any patrols now would be American, and friendly to me.

The wind dried my shivering body. I woke, as if from a dream, to reality. Why had I been

so reckless? I could have been shot by the Soviets. My dead body might be floating downstream at this moment. After surviving the long war by weighing every action carefully, I had risked my life on an impulse. Delayed fear shook my body. If I had thought of the possible consequences I would never have dared the swim. Instead, I had followed some instinct deeper than thought. At that moment, more than any other, I felt my parents might be with me, giving me the resolve and strength to seize every chance of liberation, however perilous.

While I gulped air, not a soul came into sight. Shielded by tall grasses, I dressed and steadied myself as well as I could. Walking would help. Guided by my memories of the map and the position of the sun in the sky, I found a paved road and set out for Leipzig—a major German city about forty kilometers to the west. In Leipzig I would probably meet hundreds of refugees in circumstances similar to my own.

When dusk came I asked a farmer if I could sleep in his barn.

"You are welcome to shelter with my animals," he responded without hesitation.

Though I had not asked for bread, he gave me a keen look. "When did you last eat, traveler?"

I shrugged. It seemed an eon ago. "This morning," I recalled.

He made me wait a moment, then pressed a thick slice of black bread into my hand.

"Thank you." Gratitude rushed through me. It is a good omen, I thought.

As soon as he closed the door, I gobbled the bread ravenously. In the barn I found another man—Kurt, a German civilian on his way to Munich, his hometown. Stubble covered his chin. His clothes were dusty from the open road, but they had once been good.

"I hated the Nazis," he told me.

"So did I."

"You speak with a strange accent."

"I am Polish. I was in a labor camp across the river."

"I have come from Berlin. The Soviet army besieged and eventually took the city. Once Berlin was beautiful; now it is a ruin. There are rumors that Herr Hitler committed suicide." Kurt could not meet my eyes. He flushed. "I am an electronics engineer. The army put me to work in Berlin. My company produced guidance systems for the V2 rockets. To my shame, these rockets were used to bomb London, and kill civilians. The Nazis hoped the V2 would crush the British and help win the war."

"Were the rockets that important?"

Kurt shook his head. "Luckily, there were a lot of problems with them. And the British were impossible to crush. Still, I wish I had not helped the Nazis. I had no choice. Germans who resisted them disappeared."

His eyes were hollow in a haunted face. I had not thought about the Germans that Hitler had forced into his service. I realized they had lived under a regime of fear. There was something sympathetic about Kurt, with his sad eyes awash in shame. I felt a softening in my heart.

"Our labor camp made munitions," I said. "I was only redrawing plans for buildings, but I hated helping the Nazis in any way, too."

As I waited for sleep, I could not help thinking: If so many Germans hated the Nazis, how had they stayed in power for so long? Fatigue from my travels overtook my musings. Sleep erased my questions.

We parted in the morning.Kurt bowed to me and wished me luck. "Safe travels on the

road, friend." The farmer handed me two slices of bread, and also wished me a good journey.

Before dusk I reached the city of Leipzig. The signs of war were unmistakable everywhere—bombed out factories; craters where buildings had stood; bullet holes in ruined walls—the results of Allied air raids. Scores of ordinary men, all much older than I, were clearing rubble from the streets. I stopped one.

"Please, can you direct me to an office which might help displaced Jews?"

He gave me a surprised look, as if I were a rarity. Only a Jew would ask this question. But he knew the way. "Keep on the main road. You will come to a square. Take the left turning. You will find it in the next block."

"Thank you."

The presence of so many Germans should have made no difference to me. But the way I was clothed made them stare at me. I felt nervous as I walked past them. A few weeks ago my question would have brought swift and deadly repercussions. I still felt as if a target had been painted on my back. My heart pounded as I forced myself to walk calmly.

The Jewish Relief Center was in a small, overcrowded office. Some men waited on benches by the front door. A pleasant young woman smiled an apology to me, as she shifted stacks of papers at the reception desk.

"Hello. Please excuse the mess. We only opened our doors a week ago. We are still settling in. How can we help you?"

I scuffed my feet, suddenly at a loss. "I don't really know. What do you do? I have just come out of a German labor camp—Lager Vogelgesang. I pretended to be a Catholic Pole there. I was separated from my friends and parents during the war. I know nothing but rumors about what

happened to my people during the last six years."

The woman exchanged a look with another, who was placing files into a filing cabinet.

"I met some inmates of Camp Lieberose at Torgau," I continued. "They were living skeletons. One of them, Jacob, told me about Chelmno, and the murders of Jews from the Lódz ghetto. That's where I was born—Lódz. I'm still hoping my friends from there might have survived. And I want to try to trace my parents, of course. They were at Urzedow the last time I saw them. How can I find them and my friends?"

"It is not easy. The Red Cross will take the names and addresses of the people you lost. A search will be conducted. Centers like ours are being set up in many places to help survivors."

"Survivors." The word had a hollow ring. "Have many Jewish people suffered? I have heard some stories..." It was hard to put my questions into words. I didn't want to hear bad news, but not knowing had become a torment, too.

The young woman reached across the desk to shake my hand, a strange expression on her face. "I am Tova. What is your name?"

"I am David Makow." Tears sprang to my eyes with the words. I struggled to keep my composure. Speaking my true name aloud sounded so strange to me.

"I am pleased to meet you, David," Tova said. She pushed a chair around the desk. "Please sit down. Sarah, is there any tea left?"

"Just one cup, I think."

Sarah handed me a mug of tea with a sad smile.

"David, I am afraid none of the stories you have heard could have done justice to the truth," Tova said.

I read from her expression that the news was not good. I looked at my teacup, and drank. There was sugar in it. The sweet and acid taste of real tea and real sugar startled me. I suddenly remembered the clink of teacups in the Rosenberg living room and my mother's kitchen. I drank again to hide my surge of emotions.

Tova's voice was gentle. She tried to cushion her words with kindness. "We do not have accurate counts yet, but millions of Jewish men, women and children have been murdered by the Nazis." Her words were like blows. "Camps for mass killing and the cremation of bodies were set up throughout Poland and Germany. One of the largest was Auschwitz, in southwestern Poland. There alone millions were gassed and their remains cremated. The Germans kept records of those they shot or gassed, until the days leading up the liberation. It is most difficult to find survivors, though, because they were marched to other places, as the Soviet armies approached. You will have to be patient, David."

Suddenly I could not seem to breathe. I drank, grateful for the cup in my hand. For a moment it seemed the warmth of the cup alone anchored me to this world. Otherwise I might vanish like the others—fade away into nothing more than a cry of outrage.

Millions. The scope of the disaster was impossible to take in. *Millions* murdered. How could it be possible? Surely not…

"But we can't be sure that my friends are dead?" I asked her. I managed not to voice my inner cry—*Szymek, don't leave me alone in this world...*

Tova touched my arm. "No, David. We cannot be sure. Some people have survived the worst possible circumstances. There are tales of courage and determination. We hear them every day. Look at you—who would have thought a young Jewish man could survive inside Germany

all these years? You are living proof that miracles happen. I do not tell you to give up all hope, but I want you to know the tragic fate that befell the Jews of Europe."

I nodded. "My friends might still be alive."

"It is possible. We cannot search, but the International Red Cross has stepped in to help find survivors."

"I see. Where can I speak to the Red Cross?"

"At one of the larger Relief Centers. We will give you directions. Come and talk with one of our counselors. You have some choices to make. We are just waiting—Ah, here he is."

A man with graying hair came into the office, and Tova spoke to him rapidly in Yiddish. She gestured to me and to one of the young men on the benches. I had not heard Yiddish for such a long time, I had to bite my lip to keep my composure.

"I am Gerstein," the man said. "David, you and Nathan, here, are in the same predicament. Neither of you has clear plans of what to do next."

Nathan came forward at Gerstein's gesture. Nathan was thin to the point of emaciation—a young man of about twenty-five, I guessed.

We nodded at one another. Gerstein went on, "Several major Jewish aid agencies have been established in Germany to help survivors like yourselves. The closest one is located in the former concentration camp Buchenwald, near the city of Weimar. There you can register the names and last known addresses of your missing friends and family with the Red Cross. And add your names to the lists of survivors. The Red Cross will search for the loved ones you have lost. Also, they will help you relocate. It would be best if you could go to Buchenwald in person. Do you think you can travel?"

We both nodded. Two women had come into the office, and stood a little apart, waiting for a chance to speak to the receptionist. Nathan and I thanked Tova and Gerstein and left.

"How did you survive?" Nathan asked me.

I told him a short account of my wartime experiences. "And you?"

"I worked in the burial detail in the concentration camp Matthausen."

"You must have been through a lot," I said.

He nodded. His eyes were distant. "I want to forget it. I will tell you one day," he said. "Shall we go to Buchenwald together?"

"It would be good to have your company." At last I had met a fellow Jew of nearly my age. We could talk as we traveled, and the kilometers would seem shorter. "Would you like to go tomorrow?"

"Yes. In the morning. I have nothing to keep me here." His eyes traveled over the Germans who stared at us as we left the Agency office.

"I would like to get an early start," I agreed.

We were foreigners in a foreign land—objects of curiosity. The sooner we moved on, the better. We made arrangements to meet in the morning.

CHAPTER 33 - Displaced Person

I barely slept that night. Instead I listened to mice rustle in the roof and stared into the darkness. Millions of innocent Jews slaughtered. Men, women and children. Millions. I could not comprehend it. My fears for you, Szymek, grew. But I would not give up! Once I gave your name to the Red Cross, I was sure they would find you. You had always been smarter than I in a dozen ways. You must have found a way to survive. "I will find you, Szymek," I promised in the night. Even if you were weary and worn thin by war, skin and bones, we would have our reunion. "We may weep, but we will weep together," I vowed. Slow tears soaked my pillow. I held no such hopes for my parents. Given what Richard had told me in the camp, I did not see how they could have survived. I had to resign myself to the reality—most likely my parents had been murdered.

A train ran from Leipzig to Weimar. Tickets were not easily available. The Jewish Relief Center had not given us train fare. The station was a welter of activity. No one particularly noticed us, since there were plenty of ragged young men around. Nathan and I looked at one another.

"The coal car?" he suggested.

"Why not?"

We ran out of sight on the other side of the train and approached the coal car from the

rear. I gave Nathan a boost. He clambered onto the load of coal, and reached a hand down to help me up. We both settled just as the train started to move.

The cool morning gave way to a cobalt blue sky without a single cloud. Men shoveling coal into the engine saw us, but said nothing. We stayed well away from them. The hot July sun beat down on us as the train moved at a steady speed towards Weimar.

"You did well not to return to Poland," Nathan told me. "I heard many of your Jewish countrymen were killed when they went home and tried to claim their belongings."

I shuddered. Though I had feared that very outcome, the news still came as a shock. "The Nazis fanned the flames of anti-Jewish feeling in many Poles during their occupation of Poland," I explained. Nathan nodded his understanding.

The landscape of Germany passed before our eyes. Some of the towns might have been painted postcards, they were so tidy. Clean picket fences, prosperous-looking farms and shops. The small villages were unreal in their rural beauty, as if the War had been nothing but a bad dream. Larger towns held scars from Allied bombing: craters, twisted metal and tumbled piles of fallen brick walls.

It was afternoon when we arrived in Weimar, once the famous seat of German culture. Goethe, the giant of German literature, had lived here. Now it was just another town. As I looked at each German civilian in the train station I thought, "You must have known something terrible was going on in the nearby camp. Why didn't you protest?"

The name of Buchenwald brought a blush to a woman's face as we asked for directions.

"There is a bus. Over there." Her eyes took in our look of hunger and poverty. "They will not ask you for fare." We nodded our thanks. We had stepped away from her when she softly

asked us, "Are you—?"

We turned back. "Yes," Nathan said.

The woman reached into her bag and handed us a parcel wrapped in paper. "I am sorry," she said. Then she hurried away, crossing to the other side of the street.

Nathan met my eyes. "I see there is enough guilt to go around," I said.

"Never enough," he replied.

We hurried to catch the bus which was waiting at the other end of the train platform.

"Do you go to Buchenwald?" we asked the driver.

He nodded curtly. "There are plenty of seats. Come aboard."

"We have no money to pay you," Nathan said.

"There is no charge to go there."

We sat, relieved to be out of the sun, and opened the parcel. It was a meat sandwich on thick rye bread. The woman must have given us her own lunch. I could not hold back my hunger and wolfed my portion down. Nathan ate more slowly, chewing every mouthful for a long time. His mouth twitched at my glance.

"If I'm not careful, I still throw up rich foods. Sometimes eating slowly helps."

The bus traveled uphill to a high wooded countryside. "Forests can hide a lot," I said. "The munitions factories where I worked were also located in woods, hidden from the Allies."

The driver stopped at a gate in a barbed wire fence. The gate was wide open. We entered the camp.

I don't know what I had expected. Nothing prepared me for what we saw: row on row of gray barracks, enough to house thousands of prisoners. In the dusty lanes between them, living

skeletons with bewildered faces moved like ghosts. The stench of death choked us. Tall chimneys were clearly visible at the other end of the camp. Though no smoke issued from them, I knew I faced one of the infamous crematoria. I turned away quickly, my stomach in spasm. When I dared look days later, there was much more than just the crematoria. There were lampshades said to be made of human skin on display elsewhere in the camp. I was glad I had not seen that on my first day there.

We watched as a soldier in an American uniform carried a dead body out of a barrack and loaded it on to a cart. He spoke to a second soldier.

"That's twelve this morning alone. We feed them, but they die anyway."

"We gave them too much food, and now they die of overeating." He shook his head sadly.

"The cook is forcing them to eat gruel and soups, now, to help their digestion. But some of them can't digest even that. Dear God, will the suffering of these people never end?"

"God will give this young man the comfort he could not find in life."

That soldier straightened the emaciated body with tenderness. I saw that he wore a special collar, like a priest.

The soldiers nodded at us. I realized we had frozen in our tracks, staring. The soldier with the collar came toward us.

"It's hard to watch, isn't it? Are you survivors?" he asked.

We nodded. Shock had robbed us of speech.

"Go to that main building just ahead." He pointed to a building larger than a barrack. "It's The United Nations Restitution Relief Agency headquarters. We call it UNRRA for short. They are coordinating the relief work. The Swiss Red Cross has their offices there, too. You'll find

help there, in spite of these poor souls. We have no hospital large enough to house them, so we care for them as we can here."

Inside the building, which must have been the Nazi officers' headquarters, the bustle of officials and survivors revived us. A crowd of young people, like us, stood in lines, waiting to speak to the officials. We lined up in front of a large sign with a red cross on it, saying "Missing Persons." The signs were in German, Yiddish, Polish, and English.

A smiling woman carried a tray of paper cups among us. Everyone was given sweet tea. Another middle-aged woman arrived with a tray of biscuits.

I had gulped the tea down, and hesitated, my hand over the tray.

"Help yourself. It's all right," the woman told me in English.

"Thank you," I said. The biscuit melted in my mouth. I still had not gotten used to such luxuries.

She smiled, delighted to meet someone who spoke English. "Where are you from?"

"Lódz, a large industrial city in Poland," I said.

"Where did you learn to speak English?"

"I taught myself while I was in a German work camp. Let me introduce my traveling companion, Nathan."

They shook hands. "Please thank her for me," Nathan said with a broad smile.

"He said to thank you. He speaks no English."

"Tell him he's welcome," she replied in German. "Sometimes I speak English, forgetting myself. I did not mean to be rude. You have just arrived?" We nodded. "You must be assigned a place to sleep, then. Go to that other desk over there when you're done here. And meals are

served in the next building over. You will not be here long, but we'll try to make you feel comfortable."

Comfortable in a concentration camp? She seemed to realize how strange all of this was to us. She smiled and gave us another biscuit. "You have traveled far?"

"From Matthausen," Nathan said.

Her smile wavered. "You have seen worse than this camp, then, friend." Her eyes were wells of sadness. "I could not get all of my family out of Holland in time. They died there." Nathan looked at the floor. "But you are alive. And we must find you a new home, yes?" She became brisk again. She turned to me.

"I was in a much kinder camp, near Torgau," I said.

"Now it is time for a fresh start."

The line moved. It was a matter of a few moments to register the names of my parents and their last address, of Szymek and his family, and their last address. Speaking their names and the familiar addresses aloud brought me near tears. What next? There were many other lines to join. I stood stock still, unsure.

The Red Cross worker saw our confusion. "If you have survived Buchenwald or other camps, but have lost your families and homes, you can still return to your own country. Or you may choose among three countries to make your new homes."

"Will it take long?" I asked. A foolish question, I knew, but the words spilled from my mouth.

A patient smile from the middle-aged man. "We cannot tell. It usually takes some weeks for us to find a new home for you. We will do our best, young man. But you must be patient with

our efforts."

We joined the line suggested by Red Cross man. Finally we saw the signs behind which lines had formed. One said, "Australia," in five languages. Another, "The United States," and a third, "Switzerland."

"But for Switzerland you must be young—sixteen years old or less," a co-worker added.

"Social workers will interview you once you have made your choice. They will help determine what is best for you."

One of the women was at our side. "You will need time to decide. Please come this way to get a bed assignment. I am afraid the barracks are bare, but we will fill your stomachs."

"Next, please," the Red Cross worker said.

We soon learned to call ourselves "displaced persons" rather than "survivors." It sounded better.

I clung to Nathan in the crowd. I didn't want to speak to the walking skeletons, and that made me feel ashamed. Or perhaps the sight of them made me think of death, and I put my parents' and friends' faces on their bodies in my imagination. This was like a nightmare, from which I could not awaken. "Where will you go, Nathan?"

We had been assigned beds in the same barrack, so we walked side by side, carrying the blankets, towels and soap issued to us.

"Australia," he said. "It is a new country. None of the horrors of Europe have touched it. There I will look for work."

"What did you do before the war?"

"I was apprenticed to a stonemason." He smiled. "In every country there is a need for

builders. And you?"

"I was still in school. I don't know what I can offer a new country. I would like to go to Switzerland, though. The Swiss appreciate education, and they have a well-established democratic government. Perhaps I could continue school there."

"Aren't you too old for the age limit?"

I frowned. "I'm afraid so."

Nathan squinted at me. "You are short, though. That is in your favor. And, thin as we are, it is hard to tell our ages. Perhaps you should try anyway."

I hesitated. "I have taken many gambles in my journeys..."

"If you had not, you would not be here to tell your story. So take another. The age limit is ridiculous. You want to finish your schooling, and that is what they really want—the chance to educate their immigrants and make them into good Swiss citizens. "

I smiled. "I am glad I met you, Nathan. You encourage me."

He met my eyes. "I learned that I must turn my face toward life."

The supper they served was as plentiful as promised—a meat stew filled with potatoes and carrots, with dumplings and white bread. It seemed I had never tasted anything so good. The barrack smelled of carbolic—better than the scent of death. I thought I would lie awake, haunted by the ghosts of the camp, but I fell asleep quickly, lulled by the unfamiliar feeling of a sated stomach. Nathan snored in the next bed.

First thing in the morning I scrubbed with the soap at the washhouse, and with my skin still red and clean, I stood in the line and registered for Switzerland. The man on duty gave me a sharp look.

"Name?" he asked me.

"David Makow."

"Do you have any identification papers?"

"Only this." I handed over my identity card from Lager Vogelgesang. "I took this name to survive as a Catholic Pole, hidden among Christian workers. That's how I made it through the war."

"Without anything to show your real name, you will have some difficulties. I will register you as Wośko. You can take back your real name when you reach Switzerland. This will be much easier for you."

"If you think it's a good idea," I agreed.

He wrote. "One of the United Nations Relief Agency social workers can see you tomorrow at ten a.m. You must pass the interview to be accepted. The Swiss Red Cross requires it. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"There are very few places left for Switzerland. You would be wise to choose another destination."

I hesitated. "No. I want to go to Switzerland. I will try the interview."

Though I put on a brave face, my heart sank. Behind the desk I heard an argument, hidden by a partition.

"Damn their quotas! If they saw what we see every day, they would change their tune!"

"Sh-h! The survivors will hear you."

"They can't speak English anyway. They won't understand. Send another protest. The

immigration officers have to raise these quotas. We can't fail these people. They've suffered too much already!"

"You aren't going to move the bureaucrats. No one wants too many destitute Jews."

"These young people will work hard, given the chance. Write another protest, and another, until they change their quotas!"

Nathan had just finished at the desk for Australia. If I don't get Switzerland I'll go with Nathan, I told myself, for comfort.

I volunteered to help in the kitchens, to distract myself from my anxiety. Think young, I told myself.

The next morning at ten a.m. I stood face-to-face with a middle-aged, pleasant woman. She had a sympathetic expression. I spoke to her in English, to establish a good impression.

"I wish to resume my education in Switzerland. The war interrupted it. I believe Switzerland will give me the best opportunity to achieve this goal."

I had worked on this speech all night.

While I spoke, I noticed that her eyes were focused on my upper chest. I had put on my best shirt, but I had not done up the top button. Some chest hair showed at the gap in the shirt. She must have seen it.

"Are you sure you're only sixteen?" she asked.

Faced with such a blunt question, I could not lie. "I am just a little older." I was actually twenty-one. "Please. I need this chance."

She looked at the papers in her hands and wrote something down. "We will notify you if you can go," she said, with another direct look in my eyes.

If she saw the disappointment in my eyes, she did not react. I thanked her and left the room, walking steadily, my head held high. Always the actor!

Nathan met me outside. "How did it go?"

"I didn't fool her for a second." I shrugged. "Would you like some company on the ship to Australia?"

Nathan summoned a smile. "Sure. I'll even teach you a few things."

Two days passed. In spite of logic, I could not bring myself to apply for Australia. When the roll call for Switzerland was announced I attended from stubbornness, rather than hope. Nathan tagged along. The sun shone. I clung to the beauty of the day, as my consolation prize. I had stopped listening to the list of names, when suddenly Nathan poked me.

"Wośko—isn't that your undercover name?"

My name had been called. I could not believe it. Had the social worker felt sorry for me? Maybe she was the one who had complained so bitterly about the quotas, and she was glad to bend the rules a little.

Nathan shook my hand.

The next day I climbed onto a train to Switzerland, on my way to a new country and a new life.

CHAPTER 34: One Last Camp

The train journey to Switzerland took more than a day. But what a contrast to my previous wartime train trips! I sat on an upholstered bench. Although the red fabric was shabby and stained, I was comfortable. The summer air was hot, but a brisk wind blew on me through the half-opened window. I breathed in the country smells deeply—fresh-mown grass, the fresh barnyard scent of cows, the coal smoke from the locomotive's smokestack. I watched fields and forests roll by. I ate from a fat package of sandwiches provided by the smiling women of the Red Cross, and drank from the bottle of sweet cold tea they had given me. Young men and women, like myself, in ragged clothes, and many military men packed the train full, but there were seats for all. Some of the passengers dozed.

I pictured Szymek on a similar train. Which survivors' camp had he reached? Which destination had he chosen? My imagination transformed him into a young man, six years older than when we last saw each another. He would be taller than I. Somewhere in the chaos of post-war Europe he would give his name to the Red Cross. It would join one of the lists being sent to other displaced persons camps and Red Cross offices. As soon as I learned where he was, I would join him. "Hang on, Szymek," I sent the message into the summer heat. "We will be together soon. The Germans cannot keep us apart any longer."

Reminders of the war were everywhere at first: bomb craters, ruined buildings pockmarked with bullet holes, roads and tracks blown apart. We were rerouted around destroyed bridges and tracks again and again. Our route zigzagged through France on the rail lines still intact.

The first tests of freedom lay ahead. Would the Swiss reject me when they learned my true age? That was my chief worry. Around me were younger men and women. I hoped I would fit in.

When we crossed the Swiss border, the landscape changed. Roads were clean and undamaged. The cultivated fields were green with crops. The towns were charming and tidy, with brightly painted houses and well-tended gardens. Everything was postcard-perfect. How fortunate this country had been during the war! People had lived normal lives while, next door, all of Europe had been in flames—homes destroyed, families broken up and millions dying.

I was spellbound, my nose pressed to the glass of the windowpane. "This is a glimpse of my future," I told myself, "peaceful and prosperous." I would create this new life. I would be no one's prisoner again! The sun had set before we stopped.

We pulled into a brightly lit station, called Rheinfelden, where a Red Cross worker boarded the train. The man was brisk, but kind. "All refugees from camps in Germany, including Buchenwald, come this way, please." He smiled at us through a large, curled moustache. His eyes crinkled with laugh lines. "You are well?" he asked the boys and girls who stood and moved toward the door. "You have traveled all day, yes? You must be tired. Soon you will be able to rest. Come. Only a short journey remains."

Trucks drove us to a place named Camp Rheinfelden. A jumble of low buildings stretched out before us. They were surrounded by a tall fence.

"Why have we come here?" one of the girls asked our guide. "I don't want to go into another camp."

"Dear one," the man said gently. "This is not a concentration camp. Nothing terrible will happen to you here. You will be quite safe. But the health officials insist that we keep you in

quarantine for a few weeks."

"Quarantine?"

"This means you must stay separate from the rest of the population for a while, until we are sure you are in good health and have no infectious diseases. You will eat well and walk in the clean air. Soon you will be stronger."

The girl nodded. She was probably too tired to care. We stood in line, and were given hot milk and sweet rolls. Middle-aged women in nurses' uniforms took the girls away. An older man took the young men to a building with long hallways. Another man met us there. The camp had barracks like the war camps, but bright pictures had been pasted up on the walls.

"Is everyone in good health?" the man asked with concern. "We will find medicines here for any of you who need them."

Two of the boys coughed. "We have room in the infirmary for you two. The doctor will examine you tomorrow, and give you something for that cough." The boys were quickly led away down a branching hall.

The rest of us were led to clean bathrooms, where we washed.

"Empty your pockets onto these shelves. I will watch your valuables. We have clean pajamas for you and fresh towels."

The showers spewed out plenty of hot water. A boy stood shaking, unable to move into the shower. One of the workers tried to reassure him. "It's a real shower with hot water and soap. You don't have to be afraid any more. It will make you feel better." With encouragement he was able to step under the stream at last.

I saw bones, prominent beneath his thin flesh. I shuddered to imagine what he had seen.

Like him, we were all underweight. No wonder some staggered as they walked. We were given fresh toothbrushes, and shared a tube of toothpaste. Then on to our rooms where we were quickly assigned beds.

"Sheets!" one of the boys said with awe. "And new blankets too. They're so soft!"

"I'm dreaming, aren't I?" someone murmured.

"Sh! You'll awaken the others."

The mattress eased the ache in my back from sitting too long in the train. I fell asleep almost at once. "May you be as comfortable as I am, tonight, Szymek," was my last thought.

At breakfast the next morning a pale-faced fellow asked me in Polish, "So, how did you survive?" He spoke to me as he finished his second bowl of porridge. His name was Edward and he squinted in the morning sunshine. Tall windows flooded the eating hall with light.

I related to him a short version of my tale. "And you?"

"I was in a farmer's cellar for four years, with my sister," he said with sadness in his voice. "The sunshine still hurts my eyes. We never saw the sun or the sky or a different human being most of the time. Just the farmer. He handed us our food and took away the piss-pot twice a day. We had to be quiet, too. He was always warning us about Germans inspecting the farm. Once in a while we got to see the outdoors at night, when he left the trapdoor open for a few minutes. After a while we lost track of the days. Then, after several years, the German SS got a tip from an angry neighbor. Nazi soldiers came, found the trap door into our little cellar and caught us. They sent me to Buchenwald. I never saw my sister again. I have no idea where they sent her or what they did with her. But I was lucky, because the Americans liberated Buchenwald the next month. I was only there a short time, so I survived. But where is my sister? Maybe she is still alive and I will

find her."

I shuddered. "How could you hide for so long in that cellar?"

He shrugged. "How could you pretend to be a Catholic for so long?"

"I didn't have much choice," I said.

"Neither did we," he replied quietly.

Edward was from Warsaw. I watched as he put his hands to the table and wobbled to his feet. "I almost forgot how to walk," he said, laughing a little.

"I could walk a ways with you, if you like," I offered.

Edward took my arm only when he needed to go up or down stairs. He walked like an old man. "Let's go outside. I want to see the sky," he said.

Everyone in Rheinfelden had a fantastic story to tell. One had lain under floorboards for two years. One young woman had survived the war in a Catholic orphanage. She could say the whole mass by heart. The nuns had risked death to hide her. Kurt from Austria had hidden in the attic of a school. As time passed all of them had been caught by the SS and sent to Buchenwald or other camps. Now the Red Cross had made it possible for them to go to Switzerland, to begin new lives.

I met more fellow Poles—Jadzia, a bright young woman, and her boyfriend Schmulek. They had each survived in one of the many slave labor camps. As the Soviet armies approached, they were both moved to Buchenwald. There they met and fell in love. Now they had decided to go to Palestine. Jadzia, who loved to joke and laugh, didn't want me to feel left out, so she declared that I was her cousin.

"My second cousin, twice removed, married your father-in-law's step-sister, so it's no wonder you have forgotten about me. But I forgive you. After all, we wouldn't be related if the step-mother, having three cousins who passed through Lódz on their twenty-first birthdays, hadn't stopped for a hot pretzel, and met her new husband."

I laughed. "You are sure about this?"

"Well, maybe the in-between cousin didn't have a pretzel. And the stepmother, being the second wife of my father's fourth aunt, was a little vague at times..." Her eyes gleamed with mischief. "Schmulek, make David agree with me. Having to remember all this is giving me a headache!"

"You mean having to make it up," Schmulek said, grinning.

"You are the most scandalous liar!" Jadzia declared, pretending shock.

"And you cannot possibly be related to the whole camp," Schmulek said.

"Why not? My family was large, with many strange twists."

Jadzia's tales made us laugh when sad memories threatened us. I knew she was joking in the kindest way possible. "Schmulek, you will never be bored, with Jadzia as your wife," I told him.

"You are right, David," he agreed, smiling broadly. "Without her I would forget how to smile."

One by one, we were called into the office of the supervisor, Dr. von Rohr, for an interview. My turn came five days after my arrival.

"Well, young man," Dr. von Rohr said, when I was shown into his office. "Sit with me and

tell me what you want to do when you leave this camp."

His keen brown eyes pierced mine. He took in my age, I was sure, so I spoke with all the force I could muster. "I must continue my education," I said with conviction, in German. "I have missed six years of important schooling. There are many things I want to learn and accomplish. I would like to go to university, and I will do any work required to reach this goal."

"You seem very sure of yourself," Dr. von Rohr said, smiling.

"I am sure. My father taught me the importance of learning and acquiring skills. Education is what he wanted for me. World War I prevented my father from getting a higher education, and he always regretted it. He worked hard, but our family was always poor. An education gives a man knowledge of the world and informed opinions. My father read widely on his own to make up for what he missed, and he gave me his love of learning. This is what I want, more than anything."

Dr. von Rohr listened closely to all I said. "Are you sure this is your goal, and not just your father's wish?"

"Very sure." My voice carried my conviction.

"Where do you wish to study?"

"In Switzerland. I chose this country because of the famous high quality of your schools."

He nodded. "Many young people here want to study, but I have seldom heard such dedication. The studies will be condensed and difficult. Can you go the distance, do you think?"

"I know I can."

"I see." Dr. von Rohr wrote on a file on his desk. "You have no source of money? No known relatives?"

"No. I used to work to earn money for my schooling. I could do that again."

"Yes. That might be necessary. Would you take any kind of work?"

"Any work. I am stronger than I look."

Dr. von Rohr smiled. "That I can well believe. How did you get from the east side of Germany to the west? Surely the border was closed."

"I swam the river, with my clothes strapped to my head."

"You might have been shot."

I nodded. "There were many times I might have been shot. But here I am."

His eyes pierced mine again. "Every time I meet another of you survivors, I feel humbled by your courage. Your health is good?"

"Yes. I am lucky."

"Very lucky." He steepled his hands as he studied me. I met his gaze without wavering. "I will try to help you, Miecio—David. I see you are very serious about your studies. And you obviously have the will to learn. There is not much money available to help refugees. You understand, there are many worthy cases. But I will speak to the Jewish Relief Committee, the UNRAA and the Red Cross. I know you will do your best."

"I will. I give you my word."

Dr. von Rohr stood. "I am glad to have met you. Leave this in my hands. I will speak with you again." He shook my hand and smiled.

"Thank you. I am very grateful for any help or advice you can give me," I said.

"I can see that. I will do my best."

"Well?" Jadzia asked me as I emerged into the exercise yard.

"He's going to try to get me some support to go to school," I told her and Schmulek.

"You will get it, I know," Jadzia said.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Because you deserve it." She grinned.

On August 6th Jadzia dragged me to the camp radio just in time to hear a shocking announcement. The United States Air Force had dropped a new kind of weapon called an atomic bomb on Hiroshima in Japan. The whole city had been destroyed, and probably all of the one hundred thousand inhabitants had been killed. We were shaken by the broadcast. While we were free, war in the Far East had not yet ended. Kurt was sure this fearsome new bomb would terrorize the enemy, and so bring about a speedy end to the war. If the enemy sued for peace rather than doggedly fighting on, the war would be cut short. By ending the massive war, the bomb would save many more lives in the long run. Whatever the outcome, we were sure this awesome new technology would change the world.

"Mark my words. The atom bomb will be the cause of a new war between America and the Soviet Union in the future," Kurt predicted.

"They are allies," I protested, unwilling to believe him.

"Yes, but not for long. They are both world powers. Now they will carve up Germany between them, and soon fall out of friendship."

Two days later I was summoned to Dr. von Rohr's office again.

"The news is good, David. You will receive one year's support to prepare for the entrance examination to the *Eidgenossiche Technische Hochschule*—The Swiss Federal Institute of

Technology. You may have heard this world famous university in Zurich called by its acronym—the ETH. There is enough money for you to study full time for the preparatory year. If you pass the entrance examination at the end of the year, you will win a scholarship to continue your studies." A smile lit up his face.

"I-I don't know how to thank you. This is more than I hoped for," I stammered. I could hardly get the words out past my excitement.

"It won't be easy. You will have to make up all you have missed—almost the whole of a high school education, in one year. And the entrance examinations are challenging. The university takes only the top students. Do you think you can do it?"

"This is a wonderful chance. I won't lose it for anything, I can do it," I answered at once. "Even if I have to study day and night, I will do it!"

Dr. Rohr smiled. "I knew you would rise to the challenge. I am very happy to give you this chance. Now, let's talk about how you will do it."

He recommended the Juventus High School in Zurich, because they had a curriculum especially designed to prepare students for the ETH entrance examination. "They have already promised you a place on my recommendation. Do you accept?"

I nodded gratefully. "I won't let you down."

"I don't think you will. Now, where do you want to stay until classes start in late September?"

"Somewhere I can concentrate on my studies. Can you help me get some books to get a head start?"

"It can be arranged." He thought for a moment. "You need to maintain your health while

you study. For the time being, there is room for you to stay with the group that we have assembled to go to Palestine. Their present destination is Trevano, in the Italian part of Switzerland. Trevano is near Lugano. You could swim every day, enjoy the outdoors and study until you move to Zurich in September. This is important. If you lose your health, you will not be able to finish the course."

"I understand. I will go there gladly."

"Good. There is a group leaving tomorrow. You will go by train. I will make the arrangements. Good luck, David."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you for everything."

"I am glad to be able to help. You will have a good life, young man. I am sure of it. Keep your resolve."

"I will."

I ran to tell Jadzia. I would travel with her group on their way to Palestine.

"Hooray!" Jadzia and Schmulek cheered for me.

"This is my big chance," I told them.

"But three years of schooling in one—that's what you have to master? Rather you than me," Schmulek said.

"I will do it. I have to do it. If I fail, I will be alone in Switzerland, with no one and nothing."

"Don't worry," Jadzia said. "You can do it, David. We'll say Sabbath prayers for you, besides, even though you don't need them. And you can always write to us and come to Palestine, if you want to!"

The next day, each clutching our small bundles, we boarded a fast electric train. My future

was upon me. Would I be able to reach my goal?

CHAPTER 35: Out of Darkness

The whole mood on the train to Lugano was different—lighter, cheerful. Jadzia and Schmulek teased me unmercifully until I said, "Enough! Let me think a little." They went off to explore the modern electric train. The seats were plush and new; the walls were clean, shiny metal. There was no smell of coal smoke, and the train scarcely bumped as it traveled at high velocity on unbroken track. Only a slight swaying hinted at our speed.

Some Swiss students were on the train, too, headed for a holiday before returning to college. Two fellows across from me began an animated discussion about theology.

"God is present in the most humble life," one of them said. "The evidence is there if you only look for it."

"What you call God I call chance. Random events happen, and you say 'God is at work.' If He really exists, and is so interested in human beings, how do you explain the war, and the cruel deaths of millions of innocent people?"

"Men made war. Men had to clean it up. But God was there to help in surprising ways. You just don't know about them."

"Ha! You could prove anything with that kind of reasoning."

They seemed the best of friends; there was no anger in their lively discussion. The young man who supported God's existence turned to me.

"Excuse me. If I am not mistaken, you are one of the group of survivors from the war

traveling on this train. Perhaps you had some experiences which you could share, if we do not intrude too much. We would be most grateful. I am Hans, and this is Dietrich." They spoke German.

"I overheard your discussion and I am interested in this subject myself," I said. "Many surprising situations helped me survive. Events seemed to conspire to move me in certain directions. But if I had not seized the opportunities, I would have perished. So, in the end it was up to me to make each decision and act upon it—this is what molded my fate."

"You see, Dietrich! Can you be more specific, my friend?"

"Call me David. Yes. I thought hard about my choices, always—well, nearly always. For example, my parents were unsure whether to follow the crowds and flee Lódz before the arrival of the Germans. I counseled against leaving, though thousands of Jews did flee. They were gunned down on the road, a few hours later. We escaped that fate."

"You see," Hans said triumphantly. "God intervened."

Dietrich shook his head and smiled. "No. This young man made a difficult but calculated choice, and so avoided the death that awaited the majority. His reasoning alone saved them." He turned back to me. "Was that your only narrow escape?"

"No. It was the first of many. In December 1939 I persuaded my parents to leave Lódz for the country, where food might be more plentiful. Food shortages were becoming serious. Not long after we volunteered for resettlement, the Lódz ghetto was formed, and all Jews were trapped in the poorest part of the city. Some might say our timing in leaving Lódz was lucky, because we narrowly avoided being imprisoned in the ghetto. Many of the people in the ghetto were taken and gassed in special trucks, then buried at Chelmno. Many others died of hunger, cold

and disease."

"You see, Hans. This young man thought through his decisions. He made them at lucky moments, perhaps. Although we call them lucky, he had good reasons."

"God gave a push," Hans insisted. "David did not know the ghetto was coming. True?"

"True," I said.

"So he had incomplete information on which to base his choices. Yet he chose well. God guided his choices. Please go on, David, if you do not mind speaking of the painful past."

"We left the poor village where we had been 'resettled' and traveled to a more prosperous one. Even there, the SS surrounded the Jewish quarter in October of 1942. I was away, working in a farmer's field. I knew my parents would have wanted me to live, so I fled and hid in the woods. If I had not, I would have been killed or sent to a slave labor camp."

Dietrich was jubilant. "All of these show the triumph of human courage and logic, as opposed to a resigned reliance on God or fate."

"But there were other coincidences I cannot explain," I admitted. "I was in a brutal labor camp called Janiszow for some months and I was in great danger of dying there. When a camp doctor came from Vienna and set up an infirmary, I faked a hemorrhage—coughed up blood, using blood from a boil. The doctor diagnosed tuberculosis. He knew I was faking, but he made the false diagnosis anyway. He liked me, and recommended a discharge from the camp. I was released. If he had not come, I might never have left Janiszow alive."

"You see how God works through good people," Hans said.

"I see that good people help others, but that is their choice alone," Dietrich said. "Do you have any more examples like that, David?"

"As the winter of 1942 approached, a kind farmer saw my predicament, hungry and cold in the forest, and spoke to me about decent labor camps for Christian Poles in Germany, where conditions were less extreme than in camps for Jews—where a man might survive. This gave me the idea to masquerade as a Christian, and volunteer. The labor camp, Camp Vogelgesang in Germany, became my shelter for more than two years."

"God moved the farmer. He gave David the idea," Hans said.

"David took the initiative to find a haven. His actions, not God's, saved him!"

"But in some cases, my actions did not directly affect the outcome," I admitted. "Some of my narrow escapes are a mystery to me. I cannot explain, for example, why a German doctor passed me during an inspection, naked, for the labor camp. He must have seen I was circumcised and therefore a Jew. Christian Poles are never circumcised. I would have been shot at once if the doctor had denounced me."

"A very close call. God's love often shows up in such circumstances."

"In Camp Vogelgesang a leader in our barracks prevented the others from turning me over to the Germans as a Jew in hiding. He shamed them into silence. Without his influence, I might not have survived. Another Jew in an adjoining barrack was exposed, and had to escape. I never heard word of him again, and I doubt he survived."

"A few good men do not prove the existence of God," Dietrich insisted.

"I was on my way back to Poland after the war when a Soviet soldier robbed me of a radio that I treasured. Out of nowhere, a patrol appeared, took our belongings and disappeared fifteen minutes later. This incident changed my thinking about returning to my homeland, now under Soviet occupation. I decided instead to turn around and go west. The robbery might seem like an

unimportant, small event, but it changed the course of my entire life."

"Only because of the theft of the radio were you stimulated to rethink your destination?"

"Yes. Then in June of 1945, I happened to meet a smuggler at a farmhouse where I had stopped for a drink. He showed me where to swim across the river to the American-held territories—which I did."

"That was an event engineered by God," Hans said triumphantly.

"That was a chance encounter," Dietrich said.

"I still would not have made it to Switzerland if the interviewing social worker had not decided to stretch the age limit for my acceptance. I am sure she knew I was older than the guidelines allowed."

"You must be grateful to God," Hans said.

"How do you think about these events and people?" Dietrich asked me.

This was a challenging question, and I thought long before replying. Words my father might have used sprang to my lips, but they had become my words: my opinions, seasoned by perilous experiences.

"Why did I survive while millions of others were murdered?" I said. "I was no different or better than they. I look upon everything I experienced as an interplay of coincidences. If they had not worked out in my favor, I would have perished, and would not be here telling my story. Perhaps another person would be sitting in front of you now, someone who had faced different circumstances. And you would be asking him or her the same questions. I am very grateful for what some people would call 'good luck,' but I am not a religious person. Sometimes situations or events come our way, to change our lives for better or worse. But it is up to us to seize those

chances and make decisions that are wise and bold, even when the outcome is not certain. We are the authors of our own fates. In Camp Vogelgesang, my knowledge of drafting and painting and perhaps my friendship with the man named Wladek helped preserve my life. My father valued education, and he gave me the roots of knowledge to live through these terrible times. But without a certain amount of luck, which I would call 'favorable coincidence,' the extra training would not have helped me. I do not know the roots of these lucky moments. Maybe others had such moments, but were not able to take the right action, for one reason or another. And still other people must have had bad luck where mine was good, and they are not here." I shrugged. "It is a mystery."

The young men nodded. "I see," Hans said. "And what do you plan to do now?"

"I have a scholarship to prepare for the entrance examination of the ETH. I have only one year to catch up on three years of lost schooling, but I am determined to do it."

Dietrich smiled. "You obviously make your own good luck, by hard work and dedication."

I thought about this. "Partly. But many times I owed it to others. I will always be grateful to them."

My eyes strayed to the window.

"We must let you rest, now. Thank you for sharing your story with us."

I smiled. "Actually, it was good to think of the turning points of my life."

Hans looked down. "Did your parents survive?" he asked softly.

"I am sure they didn't. But I have asked the Red Cross to look for them. I have better hopes for my closest friend, Szymek. He was trapped in the Lódz ghetto. Not many made it out of there alive, but he was young, strong and resourceful. The Red Cross is looking for him, too. I am

waiting to hear of his whereabouts."

"I hope you are reunited with him soon," Dietrich said kindly.

"We won't forget the courageous young man we met on this train," Hans said. "You have a good story. Have you ever though of writing it down for others to read?"

"No. I will tell Szymek about it, though, when I find him."

They nodded.

"Soon we will enter the St. Gotthard tunnel, one of the longest in the world," Dietrich said. "We will be in the dark for about thirty minutes. I hope you will not mind."

I shook my head. "You have given me a lot to think about. I am not nervous about tunnels."

The discussion had brought to the surface my questions about the last six years. How was I to understand the death of so many Jews and non-Jews, and accept my own survival? The more I mulled it over, the more I thought about their idea of writing the story down. I might forget some of the details if I delayed too long. Besides, writing always made me feel better. I resolved to find a time to write a journal of my story.

The theology students had lowered their voices, but they continued to talk. Though I tried not to listen to them, my keen hearing picked up much of their discussion.

"And so we come to the final question: Where was your God while the Jews of Europe, and others, endured unspeakable suffering and died? Surely a just God would have intervened! Why didn't he just kill Hitler?"

"Alas, God has given us free will, and what human cruelty devises, human courage must undo. Someone did try to kill Hitler, but he was found out and his attempt failed."

"So your God is a silent God. What use is He then?"

"Not silent. He works through good people. He guides those who seek His help. He gives courage to those who place their lives in His hands. His miracles are quiet ones. Those Jews who survived often owed their lives to good people who heard God's call, and responded."

Dietrich's voice was sad. "I am sorry, Hans, but I find your God too cold, too distant. If He does exist, I have no desire to know Him."

"If you could know Him as I do, you would not say such things!"

As we entered the tunnel, the noise of our passage drowned out their continuing debate. Such debates would take place in thousands of churches and synagogues, I thought. And then I let the darkness of the tunnel sweep away my thoughts. I was alive. For now, that was enough.

Strangely, the tunnel did not frighten me. It closed like a massive door upon the past, and silenced my thoughts. The soothing sound of wind and rail, echoing from the rock walls, fell upon me like warm summer rain. It spoke undeniably to my deeper mind: *You are alive. You will make a new future.* For the first time, in the dimly lit train, speeding through the darkness of the St. Gotthard tunnel, surrounded by kind young people, I began to feel secure and peaceful.

When the train emerged into daylight, a new door opened. The world had changed. The roads were soaked with sunshine. Olive trees replaced the pine forests of northern Switzerland. People waved and smiled at us as the train sped past them. The southern part of Switzerland was a new world. I felt that I, like the train, was moving out of darkness into the light. I was leaving behind six years of darkness, and starting toward a new and better life. At last I felt free.

The Trevano transfer center was mainly for war survivors who were going to make

Palestine their home. It was in an old castle, surrounded by beautiful gardens, set on a hillside on the outskirts of Lugano. About one hundred young men and women, mostly from the Rheinfelden Camp, awaited transport to their destinations. We studied Hebrew and practical skills like carpentry. I volunteered to teach English.

My books had not yet arrived, so I asked for a blank journal and took it to the beach. There I began to write down my story, holding nothing back. At first I did not know how to start. Then I remembered the letters I had written Szymek—carefully crafted and rehearsed again and again in my mind, like comforting conversations. I began the journal. Other memories followed, often surprising me with their wealth of detail. I ordered my account. I thought of Szymek often, and it spurred me on. I looked forward to sharing my story with the best friend of my childhood and youth. When the memories dug too deeply into painful places, I broke off and swam in the waters of a nearby lake until I panted. Then I wrote again in the shade of palm trees. The account went swiftly, as if I were purging myself of the past, getting ready for a new life. I breathed in the scent of exotic flowers, massed around the beach and a nearby resort. The swimming helped body and mind. Strength I had not felt for years returned to my arms and legs. I walked for hours through the gardens, sometimes with Jadzia and Schmulek, laughing at trifles, learning to joke again.

One day, a new group of survivors arrived at Trevano. Jadzia brought a gentle-looking girl over and introduced her to me.

"David, this is Helen, your future wife." Both Helen and I laughed.

Helen was small, with blonde hair. I met her again in my English class, and we became friends. She had survived the war in a camp in Austria, with an assumed Polish Catholic name, like me. She told me her story of how her father had been shot, and her mother and three sisters

sent to concentration camps. She, too, awaited word from the Red Cross, but she did not think it likely that they had survived.

My books arrived. Dr. von Rohr had found several good introductory books on mathematics, physics and biology.

In the middle of September, I left Trevano for Zurich. Helen came to the train station with me. Saying good-bye, she stretched on her toes and gave me a kiss. This was the first time a girl had kissed me for her own reasons.

CHAPTER 36: The Impossible Dream

"Welcome to Zurich," Mrs. Rosen told me as she showed me to my rented room. She smiled. "Another survivor is staying here as well. We all have Shabbas together."

The Rosens' large apartment was in a fine district of the busy city of Zurich. Opposite the house was a concert hall and the neat gardens at the edge of the lake. At the top of a nearby hill stood the ETH—the technical university which I was hoping to attend. The University of Zurich was close to it.

The director of the Juventus school had only one word for me, when I explained my intentions of preparing for the ETH entrance examination in one year. "Impossible!" he exclaimed. "Even Swiss-born students, with a full high school education behind them, need one or two years here to prepare for the examination. This is no ordinary entrance test. It's very rigorous, very tough. The ETH has the highest standards. How do you suppose it has earned a worldwide reputation? You can attend some courses here if you like, but I will take no responsibility for your success. You are attempting the impossible. You are on your own."

I would not let his words bend my spirit. "With your schedule of classes, I can only fit enough in if I enroll in your day school and night school at the same time. That way I will put three years of classes into one year. Will you let me do that?"

The director shrugged. "Do what you like. The year's fees have been paid. But you are wasting your time."

The ETH office gave me a schedule of exams. The exams covered a bewildering number of subjects. Three languages were required. They would accept Polish as my main language, and German and English as my foreign languages. I was grateful for the time I had studied English in secret during the war, and had been forced to practice my German. I had a good start on both languages. Polish history could be substituted for Swiss history. But that still left algebra, calculus, descriptive and analytical geometry, physics, organic and inorganic chemistry. In the natural sciences I needed to learn geology, geography, biology, botany and zoology. The schedule of classes at Juventus forced me to register for some subjects at the introductory and the advanced level at the same time.

I began to study in earnest. To save streetcar fare, I bought a used bicycle, and cycled from my room to the Juventus. I managed to live on fifty Swiss francs a month—the support Dr. von Rohr had arranged. I ate in a very inexpensive restaurant called *Frauenverein*, which was operated by Swiss women. A social worker, Mrs. Lind, kept track of my studies. She, too, doubted the outcome. "Don't worry," she told me, "if you fail the examination for the ETH you can still get a job as a draftsman." She meant to be kind, but I fought to maintain my determination.

Meanwhile, I carried the hope that I would hear of the fate of my parents and Szymek. Helen wrote to me. Her family had been traced. Two of her three sisters had survived the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp—a miracle beyond her expectations. Her mother had died of typhus three days before the end of the war, and her youngest sister some time before that. An uncle and aunt had also survived. They were going to the United States of America, so Helen decided to go there, rather than to Palestine. Her relatives would settle in New York, then arrange for Helen's immigration papers. All this would take time. In January 1946 Helen found a job designing

women's hats in Zurich, and moved into a room near the university. We met on Sunday afternoons.

The survival of some of Helen's family bolstered my hopes for Szymek and perhaps even his brother, and other friends. Word came from the Red Cross: they still could not track down my parents and Szymek. My longings burst out in words when I was alone.

"Where are you, Szymek, my friend? I am struggling to make a new life, but I want to share it with you! Please fight your way to the west, too." I thought he must be somewhere in Eastern Europe, where authorities might not be so efficient in finding survivors.

"Where are you, Szymek?" Like a bruise that would not heal, the question haunted me.

"I see you are still here," the Director of the Juventus remarked to me as we met in the hallway near the end of the study year, in June. "Still trying to do the impossible?"

"Yes, sir," I replied.

He shook his head. "I see you have been getting good marks," he said with a snort.

I knew I had been getting top marks, but I saw he was not going to acknowledge that.

"An achievement, I grant you," he went on, "but that proves nothing. Why not be reasonable and build on this success in a rational way? With these grades, you could easily find entrance to a technical school, and graduate as a technician or a draftsman, in a short time. You could find work, make your way in the world. Why throw yourself into the ETH entrances examinations, and be disappointed? They begin early in September, you know. There is barely enough time to review all the subjects, not to speak of the time you need to study some basics you still need to learn. Unlike our tests, those exacting examinations run every day for three weeks,

including demanding oral exams. There is no time to cram your head full of facts at the last moment. You are likely to fail miserably, and that failure will hurt your record, wherever you try to go next. Think, Makow! Is pushing yourself to do the impossible really worth such a high price? Are you being realistic?"

Though his words made me quail, I managed to meet his eyes. "I prefer to think I will do it," I said, and refused to listen to my inner doubts. "I will not give up on my dream without even trying."

He snorted again. "How do you intend to spend your summer?"

"I will review all the subjects," I said. I already had decided to study on the city beach, alternating between study and exercise hourly throughout the day.

"I wish you good luck. One day you will learn to listen to people with experience, Makow. Since there is no graduation ceremony I take my leave of you now. Perhaps you will remember my words later. What you have learned this year will not be lost, anyway."

I looked him full in the face. "I have learned a great deal, and I am most grateful for the opportunity to study at this fine school. Glimpses into the sciences, both theoretical and natural, have been most fascinating. Thank you for letting me do it my way, Herr Director."

He raised his eyebrows, either at the meaning of my words or at my much improved German. I knew I was stubbornly boasting to a man who had belittled me, but the words had to be said. For one thing, I really *was* grateful. The teachers had been excellent, and the lesson plans well organized. Without this help, attempting the ETH entrance exams really *would* have been impossible. The Juventus school had given me a good grounding in all the major subjects. All I needed now was to solidify that knowledge through review, and to memorize the most important

topics and core facts. The Director considered this task to be impossible in the time available. He knew more about the exams than I did. Could I fight the odds and succeed?

During June I got a letter from Jadzia. It had been forwarded through the Jewish Relief Agency, and had taken weeks to reach me. Was there a letter from Szymek, too, perhaps lost in the system?

Dear Cousin David,

It grieves me to be so far from you and other important friends still in Switzerland. But you may rely on my continued friendship and support. How is Zurich? Are you very cold? Does your head ache from studying? Have you put corks in your ears to stop your new knowledge from falling out of your head?

Schmulek and I arrived safely in Palestine. Nothing is as we expected, except the heat. I will never complain about being cold again. And of course every drop of water is treated like gold. We use only a trickle to scrub our teeth.

We have been sent to a communal farm in the hills, called a 'kibbutz,' where we learn to grow oranges and raise goats and chickens. There are soldiers everywhere. The Haganah is the Jewish self-defense force here, and we will be taught to handle guns, too. Of course, the other bank of the River Jordan is in Arab hands, despite British promises contained in the Balfour Declaration. There is a lot of dispute over which lands should be ours and which should belong to the Arabs. And to think, that throughout the five hundred years of the Ottoman Empire, both Jews and Arabs lived in peace! But I suppose thinking about the past too much doesn't help the present. Well, I hope we don't get shot here after we went through so much to survive the war in Europe.

Seriously, we are very happy. We have planned our wedding for December. No one seems to wait long here. Everyone talks politics, so you will forgive me for doing the same. Most of us think it's time for the Jews to be strong and use force to defend our new lands. This makes me nervous. Doesn't force lead to a violent response? How strange it is to be in a country that is Jewish! The only non-political residents are the chickens, and how much do you want to know about chickens, anyway?

I like living with so many other people, but what a mountain of dishes there are to wash after each meal. All of these people are my new family, and I am trying to get along even with the ones who are a little snooty.

Remember you are not really alone in the world, dear David. You are part of a big group of survivors starting new lives all over the world. I hope you have been reunited with Szymek by now, and have pounded each other on the back until your teeth rattled!

How is Helen? Are you romantic yet? She is just right for you, so why delay?

Good luck with your studies. I think you are really smart. Don't give up your dreams. That's what life is all about, right?

Love, Jadzia and Schmulek.

Her letter cheered me greatly. Helen and I laughed over it and reread it until it was quite tattered. We shared everything.

My landlord, Mr. Rosen, complained about how badly his scrap metal business was going. "I was doing splendidly during the war," he said, "but now the war is over." He raised the rent for my room, so I had to move out. Helen helped me pack and find a new room close to the

university. The landlady, Frau Mussli, seemed to be a kind woman. The place was within a few minutes' walk of Helen's room, so we were quite content with the move, though I hated losing time from my studies.

Then the summer was upon us, and I took my books to the beach every day, bright and early. I took sandwiches with me for lunch, broke for a brief supper, and kept to my routine vigorously until the light failed in the evening—studying for forty-five minutes and then exercising for fifteen minutes. It seemed to work for me. Just as my mind tired the study period finished, and I stopped for a swim or some other exercise. Then, refreshed, I began again. I rotated subjects to keep my mind alert, too.

Helen had to be content with short visits on Sundays. She understood. Our friendship and affection had grown much deeper. I found that Helen had all the qualities for a faithful life long companion. She was patient, gentle, and always ready to help and comfort. She had a sweet face and was petite--shorter than myself. I felt comfortable with her. She had decided to apply for immigration to the U.S.A. with her aunt and uncle, and I was increasingly troubled by the idea of her departing. But my studies had to stay at the center of my thinking, and I continued to review and cross-examine myself in every subject.

One day a smiling stranger approached me on the beach. "Excuse me, young man, but may I introduce myself? I am Dr. Max Fischer, and I have become intrigued by your study regime. I am a psychologist with a private practice, and you may be the most disciplined person I have ever encountered."

Dr. Fischer usually came to the beach after five in the afternoon. I found myself drawn to this man of about thirty-five years of age. His interests were widespread. Though he had studied

the life sciences along with psychology, he also had a keen interest in physics. I enjoyed my discussions with him. We became friends, and talks with him made my studies less lonely that summer. Soon he learned how I survived the war and of my ambition to gain entrance to the ETH. His interest in me increased because he was writing a paper on how survivors of the Holocaust adapted to a normal life. I had forgotten what was normal.

One evening in mid July Helen and I dined with Max in a restaurant as his guests. "I had to register my choices for study at the ETH today," I said during the meal.

"What did you decide?" Max and Helen asked me at once.

"I had a lot of trouble making the choices," I admitted. "So many different subjects interest me. I considered agriculture, town planning, the visual arts, electrical engineering and physics, but I finally chose architecture. With architecture I can combine my interests in art, functional design and technology. And my experience with drafting will give me a head start."

Max nodded with pursed lips, while Helen smiled encouragement. "You will be able to work part of your time outdoors with architecture," Helen noted. "I know you'll like that."
Max shook his head. "I admit to feeling disappointed. You are too clever to confine yourself to architecture," he said. "For a man of your intelligence, only the crown of the sciences will do—theoretical physics! Life, nature and the universe present a mystery which only physics attempts to unravel. Think of it! We are surrounded by basically empty space. All matter consists of atoms, with protons and neutrons making up the nucleus and electrons orbiting them. Imagine a large football field. In its center is the nucleus of the atom, about the size of a pea. At the field's edges are the orbiting electrons one thousand times smaller. There is nothing in between. Since all matter is made up of atoms, the whole world consists of mostly empty space. Yet matter appears

entirely solid to us. This is because our eyes cannot see the parts of the atom nor the atoms themselves. The same applies for molecules, which are made of many atoms. So what we see is quite, quite different from the true nature of things."

Max's excitement was contagious. "And who could have expected that mass and energy are the same thing? Maybe soon there will be an unlimited source of cheap power, and life on earth will never be the same! There might even be other invisible waves, in addition to electromagnetic waves, that are responsible for telepathy and other psychic powers. Maybe there is a soul and an afterlife. Maybe there is a God! What is consciousness? Physics might answer these questions in a tested scientific way.

"We live in a mysterious world and to understand it should be the highest and noblest goal of men."

"Your dinner is cold, Max," Helen pointed out.

Max joked. "Without the kindness of people like you, I would probably starve. But I will stop lecturing you now. Please think about what I have said, though, David. This is a big turning point in your life. What you choose to study will determine your profession. Choose carefully."

I remembered Ninochka's advice—to find a skill that warms your heart, and a woman who is a harbor for you. I did not act immediately on Max's advice, but his words engraved themselves deep inside me. And I looked at Helen. I was not ready to marry, yet she might move away if I did not act soon. Was she the right woman to become my harbor? These two large decisions weighed on me.

There was only one exception I made that summer in my regimen of studies. Every few weeks I took up my journal, and added to it. And every night, as I quieted my mind, I turned my

thoughts to my dear friend. "Szymek, how long must I wait to see your face? Why can't the Red Cross find you?"

During mid August painful doubts began to invade my thoughts. Could I really pass these difficult examinations? What had made me so foolishly self-confident? The Director of the Juventus school and my social worker both counseled me to turn my efforts in other directions, but I stubbornly went on. Why did I attempt the impossible?

Trying to squash my doubts, I reviewed the material again and again. In my dreams I stood in front of a professor, stumbling for an answer to his searching questions, and admitting I did not know.

Early in September, the day before my three weeks of examinations began, Frau Mussli told me she needed my room for visiting relatives. I would have to move out within a week. Frau Mussli ducked her head in apology and, as she turned away, she reached into her pocket.

"Oh, yes. This letter came for you last week. I keep forgetting to give it to you. Here it is."

I read the return address. The Swiss Red Cross. My heart beat fast. I held my breath as I tore it open. "Szymek, Szymek, soon we will be together!" I said the words out loud. Then I read the short letter.

Dear Mr. Makow,

We regret to inform you that we could not locate the Brzezinski family. Records are incomplete, but we know that they stayed in the Lódz ghetto until the spring of 1944. Whether they were among the Jews sent to their deaths in Chelmno cannot be confirmed.

We are deeply sorry to give you such sad news.

Yours sincerely…"

My self-discipline crumbled. I collapsed on my bed, sobbing. For six long years I had cherished my hopes of seeing Szymek again, and now I had to let them go. If the Red Cross, with all its connections, could not find him, I knew I would never find him myself. I would never even know his fate. That seemed worse, somehow, than any shocking news. I suspected he had been murdered by the Nazis in Chelmno, like most of the Jews in the Lódz ghetto.

Now he would never read the journal I had written. We would never laugh together again, never share our adult joys. My tears were bitter. I did not know how to say good-bye to him.

After a while I attempted to finish my review for the following morning's exam, but I could not concentrate, in spite of trying late into the night. I don't know when I fell asleep.

Dawn broke through the curtained window of my room. I awoke with a newly developed cold and the thought that this was the first day of the ETH entrance exams. That morning, with a fever and a heavy heart I went for the first exam, a four-hour written test in mathematics. Before I finished the test I knew I had not done well.

In the afternoon I sat with my chemistry books in front of me, a box of tissues at hand, forcing myself to concentrate on the subject of my exam the next day. My heart was not in it. My eyes blurred with unshed tears.

That evening Max came to see me in my room. He found me a changed man. With one glance he took in my physical state, the letter from the Red Cross, laid out carefully on my bureau, and my distress. Immediately he understood. He sat down facing me.

"The true strength of a man, " he said, "is how he takes losses and misfortunes. You, my friend, have demonstrated your courage and determination in the face of one of the greatest

periods of cruelty in human history. We know now that maybe as many as six million innocent people were murdered by Hitler's followers. Perhaps even your trusted friend, Szymek perished under the Nazis' rule."

I nodded and handed him the letter. Max had suspected its contents. He put it down reverently and captured my eyes with his own. "David, you live when so many died. Complicated feelings are sure to arise because of this. You will work them through, in time. But I urge you now to rejoice in your survival and do not hesitate to move towards your future. Take your exams. You survived and now it is time to rebuild you life. You have so much to be glad for. Accept today."

He gripped my arm. I felt the force of the man's passion for life, and some of my own returned to me. His understanding bolstered me; the warmth of his friendship reached through my sorrow. We sat joined by a silent accord. The past would never be forgotten, but it need not rule my future. Creating my future would not dishonor the dead.

After a time, a smile appeared on his lips, and in his usual voice he said, "Now, your task is to review the subject matter for your next exam. Focus on that and nothing else. I have no doubt of tomorrow's outcome. Study well and sleep. Prepare yourself mentally for the next few weeks. Do not lose sight of your goal! Take it one step at a time and you will make it. My young friend, you have already succeeded." He left me then, but his words stayed with me.

I opened a drawer and put away the letter from the Red Cross. "Goodbye, my friend," I thought. "I will never forget you." Szymek's place in my heart would remain, but I would not lose myself in mourning.

Max had been gone only a few minutes when Helen appeared at the door, always there to help. "Don't worry, David," she said with a warm smile. "We will find you a new room. The

newspapers are full of advertisements. Think only of tomorrow's exams. With a good overall average, you will pass."

Three weeks of disciplined effort followed. I kept to my routine and completed every exam almost effortlessly. Then the great day came. The results were printed on pages posted on the wall outside of the rector's office. I scanned the pages, my heart racing, and there, under the letter M, was my name! I had been accepted to the School of Architecture. I had done it! Father would have been so proud.

A week later, Helen and I went to an entrance ceremony for new students. Gradually my dream was becoming a reality. Sunlight streamed through stained-glass windows on the throng of happy students and proud relatives. The rector of the university spoke, welcoming us as brothers into those halls of learning. We were joining a proud tradition. The world's knowledge would be opened to us, and we would be molded into new and better people, ready to venture forth and make our unique contributions. The ceremony concluded with an ancient Latin refrain. An entire orchestra played, swelling the sound of our raised voices. I stood there with Helen's hand in mine. The time-honored words echoed from the high vaulted ceilings of the hall:

Gaudeamus igitur	(Let us rejoice therefore
Juvenes dum sumus	While we are young.
Post jucundum juventutem	After a pleasant youth
Post molestam senectutem	After a troublesome old age
Nos habebit humus.	The earth will have us.)

Loud and clear the song continued.....

Vivat academia	(Long live the academy!
Vivant professores	Long live the teachers!
Vivat membrum quodlibet	Long live each member
Vivat membra quaelibet	Long live the whole!
Semper sint in flore.	May they always flourish.)

"Now David," Helen said, "you have joined the world of learning and great pursuits."

POSTSCRIPT: The Rest of the Story

News of David's excellent results in the entrance examinations at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich, September 1946, reached the Jewish Community Center and the Juventus school. Mrs. Lind and her colleagues at the Center could hardly believe it, and they granted David a scholarship to finance his studies at the ETH. The Director of the Juventus school asked David to write an article about the excellence of their teaching methods. Professors from the Juventus contacted David to congratulate him.

After being enrolled in the School of Architecture for several weeks, David decided to change his field of study to engineering physics. Max inspired him to follow this more challenging academic course. David graduated in 1950 and in 1959 he returned to Zurich to earn a Doctorate of Sciences.

Helen and David married in November 1947, while he was still a student. The first of their three children, their son Henry, was born two years later when David was in his third year of studies at the ETH. Marrying and having children while a student was almost unheard of in Switzerland at that time.

After graduation David found a job with Brown-Bovery, one of the largest electrical equipment companies in the world, near Zurich. However, the onset of hostilities with the Soviet Union and the specter of nuclear war dampened David and Helen's desire to live in Europe. Helen's two surviving sisters had settled in Toronto. They applied for Helen and David to

emigrate to Canada. Since David had a degree from one of the world's top universities, the acceptance came quickly.

In March 1951 David and his family arrived in Canada. They first lived with Helen's family. David wrote to various companies, seeking employment. He was hired by the National Research Council of Canada (NRC) in Ottawa, Canada's capital city. David's daughter Anya was born in 1952 in Ottawa, and his second son, Stanley, in 1956. David Makow became a valued scientist at the NRC. During his distinguished career he received five awards, registered twelve patents for his inventions and published over seventy scientific papers. Among other accomplishments, he pioneered the use of ultrasound in medical diagnosis, and contributed to the development of search and rescue distress beacons used to locate crashed airplanes.

David found his thirty-four year career at the NRC both satisfying and rewarding. In Canada he enjoyed a sense of democracy, human rights and respect for the individual, more deeply ingrained than in Europe. He has never regretted his choice of new home, and is happy living in Ottawa.

After retirement David continued to explore the world of visual arts to which he was attracted in his early days. In particular, he recognized the potential of liquid crystals and thin films. He uses these materials as new media for artistic expression in his paintings and sculptures, which are widely exhibited.

David's story of survival is closely based upon his recollections. It became a book with the publication of *Dangerous Luck* in January 2000. The present book, based upon the first work, written jointly with co-author, Beverley J. Spencer, offers the vivid story of a survivor to add to the accounts of the Holocaust.